I will not describe the specific locations. I will tell you the mood, the feeling, the effect that I would like to see.\textsuperscript{1}

White.
Silence . . . (where am I?) . . . whispering wind . . . whssss . . . whssss . . . whssssss . . . brown rocks gently pierce the clean white blanket of snow . . . drifting quietly . . .

When suddenly the earth disappears, drops a mile straight down . . . a new world opens below . . . gentle green mountains fall with grace into the valley . . . a river burning in sunlight wends its way into the distance . . . (and for the first time in my life, I feel like I can fly!)

Soaring now over the tree tops! (is this Maria's mountain? For I have seen The Sound of Music before, but I can never remember exactly when Julie Andrews as Maria will appear on a mountain top, singing . . .)

Isolated locales are selected by the camera and photographed with such stylized beauty that the world below, however real, will be seen as a lovely never-never land where stories such as ours can happen, and where people sometimes express their deepest emotions in song.

Now, another steep drop (it wasn't Maria's mountain after all) to a broad, sparkling river with tiny white boats pushing against the current . . . the camera now moving faster . . . now skimming over rocks and trees (is this Maria's mountain?—no) . . . another cliff . . . a broad green valley (Mom says that the hills around Reading, Pennsylvania, look a lot like the lower mountains in Austria—she says that when she visited the Alps she felt like she'd come
... an eccentric patch of evergreen trees growing on top of a sharp cliff . . . a village peaceful in the shadow of an onion-domed church (*why don't any of our churches in Reading have those pretty domes?*) . . . an aristocrat's palace soaking quietly on the banks of a lake (*I wish we lived in a house like that. I want to go to Disneyland to see Cinderella's castle, which Mom says is modeled on an actual castle in Germany; I want to go to Germany to see the real Cinderella's castle. I want to go to Austria to see where they filmed The Sound of Music. I asked Mom, can we go there some time, and she said Honey, I would love to take you there someday when you're a little older; she said she's already been there once but she wouldn't mind going again, it's one of her favorite places in the whole world; she said Honey, someday you'll get to go there if you want to. But I don't understand how I'll get there unless she takes me. I don't want to go there by myself, I wouldn't like it there by myself. I want to go there with my Mom. Will she be gone forever someday? Someone told me that heaven isn't a real place—it's not a place, it's a state of mind, they said—so if heaven isn't a place, what happens to you when you die? I'm scared of infinity: a winding staircase that keeps turning and turning and has no beginning and no end . . . *)

... gliding over a dense forest of trees rushing beneath like water bursting forth from a dam (*Maria's mountain!*) . . . another swath of green trees . . . and beyond, a carpet of green grass on the crest of a shapely, rolling hill . . . flutes twitter their whirling way down a spiral stair in hasty retreat from the onrushing of brass and strings now at their trembling peak!

Faster and faster we skim the treetops. And then suddenly we "explode" into:

To film what is one of the most famous openings in movie history, a helicopter swooped down just as Maria rushed up to her beloved mountain. The timing on that shot had to be perfect. So, to make sure Andrews came up the hill at the moment required, Marc Breaux [co-choreographer, along with Dee Dee Wood] hid in the bushes nearby. As the helicopter
ascended, Breaux, using a megaphone, cued Andrews and she rushed up the hill and began singing.

"The funniest memory I have of the movie," said Breaux's wife, Dee Dee Wood, "is of Marc hiding in the bushes yelling 'Go, Julie!'"

"The helicopter was a jet helicopter," Andrews recalled. "The cameraman was strapped onto the side of the helicopter, hanging out so he could get the shot, and he came at me sideways. I'd start from the end of the field, and I'd hear Marc yelling 'Go!' from a bullhorn. The helicopter would come at me, clanking away, then it would go around me to get back to the beginning to repeat the scene. But when it circled around me, the downdraft from the jets was so strong that it would literally knock me over. I couldn't stay up. They had to do this shot about ten times, and finally I got so angry I yelled, 'That's enough!'" (Hirsch 149-50)

"Our helicopter pilot was the greatest ace, a real daredevil," recalled Pia Arnold [the German production manager on the film]. "But he was too reckless. I heard that he was killed in 1968 working on some film." (Hirsch 83)

I

My mom kept our record player in the little hallway between the kitchen and the downstairs bathroom. I guess she wanted it there so she could listen to music while she worked in the kitchen. There's a photograph of me in front of the record player from around 1967 when I was four years old. I can't say I "remember" the time, the feelings, the experience it refers to. The picture may contain all that's left of my memory; it may even have created the memory within me: I lie asleep on the floor in front of the stereo console's speaker panel, flat on my back, my legs spread akimbo like a frog's, my arms flung out on either side of me, my hands gently resting open, my mouth sweetly agape. I'm wearing Charlie Brown pajamas. On the floor to my right, the album jacket of the Broadway cast recording of Hello, Dolly!; to my left, the album jacket of the movie soundtrack recording of The Sound of Music.

Now I never go to sleep without music playing. And when I awake, the first thing I want is to hear music.

For as long as I can remember, I've known that The Sound of Music was my favorite movie. Based on the memoirs of Maria von Trapp, it's the story of a girl who leaves the convent to marry a naval captain, becomes the stepmother to his children, transforms the family into a successful singing group, and leads them in a hair's-breadth escape from Nazi-occupied Austria. The film opened in March of 1965 to mixed, even hostile reviews, such as Pauline Kael's for McCall's magazine, which said
The happiest family in all the world! The Sound of Music is the kind of film “that makes a critic feel that maybe it’s all hopeless. Why not just send the director, Robert Wise, a wire: ‘You win, I give up’” (qtd. in Hirsch 175).

My parents took me to see the film sometime during its original release, which lasted a record-breaking four-and-a-half years, so I could have been anywhere between eighteen months and six years of age (fig. 1) when I first saw it. When it was rereleased in 1973, I saw it several more times and learned then that lots of people, not just me, were obsessed with this movie. My mother had already seen it five times or so, my Aunt Pauline something like seven times. Seven seemed a crazy number of times to have seen a movie; its being an “odd” number no doubt invited associations with deviance—though wasn’t seven also a “lucky” number? Did that then mean, somehow, that to be odd was also to be
lucky? And did that in turn mean that if I or anyone else were in any way odd (for example, if I were a sissy, which lots of kids in school thought I was) it might not be such a bad thing after all? *The Sound of Music* seemed to bring about and validate a counter-counterculture of nerds, weirdos, sissies, and squares whose obsessions with the film were immediately understood to be as newsworthy as the film itself. The key to the success of *The Sound of Music*, Joan Barthel argued in a November 1966 *New York Times Magazine* article, was “people”—not just the people behind the scenes who made the film, but also the people out front. Not only the extremists like . . . the woman in Wales who sees it every day, or the man in Oregon who saw it so often he sent the studio a copy of the script written from memory, but the average, garden-variety movie-goer who has seen it once, twice, perhaps three times, and has spread the word. Like the people in Moorhead, Minn., where the picture ran for more than a year in the town’s only movie house and sparked a protest demonstration by students of the local college who, under the name POOIE (People’s Organization of Intelligent Educatees), picketed—“49 Weeks of Schmaltz is Enough”; “Don’t Get Caught in the von Trapp”—for a change of bill. Or the people in Manila, who got so unruly in their demand for holiday tickets that police emergency squads had to be dispatched to cope. Or the people in Salt Lake City, where the theater showing it recorded an attendance of 509,516 as of last month, although the city’s population was only about 190,000 in the last census. (47)

Between the time of its initial release in 1965 and its rerelease in 1973, my connection to *The Sound of Music* derived mainly from listening to the soundtrack album and from looking tirelessly at the pictures and reading the text in the eight-page, record-album-sized “storybook” that came with the album. Among the pictures in the storybook were twelve black-and-white stills from the movie. Each corresponded more or less to a musical number on the record, and there was a blurb of text adjacent to each film still that explained where the musical number occurred in the story. Paying little attention to the accompanying text, however, I would stare at the pictures and enter into them and animate them as I pleased, the music washing over me all the while.

In one of my favorite stills (fig. 2), the seven von Trapp children sing “So Long, Farewell” at the dinner party given in honor of their father’s soon-to-be fiancée, the Baroness Schraeder. The children, whose ages range from five to sixteen, stand on the short flight of stairs that rises up from the parquet floor of the family manse’s grand entrance foyer. Below the first step stands Louisa, the second oldest von Trapp girl—who, because she had long blond hair, would have been, to my mind,
While the party is the scene of much merriment, it is also marked by rumblings of the growing Nazi threat, and the Captain argues violently with those of Nazi leanings. The children, who have been watching the dancing from the stairs, sing their good-nights in *So Long, Farewell*. It is during these festivities that Maria realizes she is in love with the Captain and leaves in dismay and bewilderment.

The villa is not the same without Maria. The Captain, hurt by her departure, forbids the children to mention Maria’s name. He says he plans to marry the Baroness. At the Abbey, the Mother Abbess sends for Maria. She gently explains that not everyone is cut out for the life of a religious order and that the love of a man and a woman is also a holy thing. Singing *Climb Ev’ry Mountain* as inspiration, she sends Maria back to the Von Trapp villa.

Figure 2. *The Sound of Music* storybook.
my sister Suzanne, who was the second oldest in our family and who also had long blond hair. For at this point I interpreted pretty much everything I heard and saw as having something directly to do with me and my immediate family (fig. 3). On the first step stand the two von Trapp boys, Kurt, the younger one, and Friedrich, the older; to the extent that I could identify the boys with myself and my older brother John, Kurt would have been me, and Friedrich would have been John. Standing on that same step and peeking out from behind Louisa is the youngest, Gretl; though Gretl was the youngest of seven just as I was the youngest of six, she was too inarticulate and fat-faced and infantile for me to have seen myself in her. On the third step peeking out from behind Kurt stands Marta, while behind Friedrich stands Brigitta; neither Marta nor Brigitta fully corresponded with my sisters Karen and Betsy, though like Karen and Betsy they were brunettes and “middle children.” On the fourth step stands the oldest, Liesl, by herself; she would have been my oldest sister, Mary Jo, for both Liesl and Mary Jo were beautiful, brunette, interested in boys, and kind to their younger siblings—or at least Mary Jo was attentive to me in particular, for I was her biggest fan, I loved
to laugh at her jokes, I considered her “my favorite sister,” and I would often say so to my other siblings whenever I got into a fight with them.

In the picture, the children’s mouths are open wide in song. Not only do they get to enjoy the festivities of the party past their normal bedtime, but now they themselves have become the center of attention at the party. As if on stage, they are framed by the ornate, white railings of the stairway, and they are mounted on the steps, so elegant and wide that the carpet need not stretch from side to side. (By contrast, the carpet on our narrower, straight-up-and-down staircase at home was wall-to-wall.) Two slender white pillars rise up from the stairway landing and go somewhere beyond the top of the picture frame, high above the children’s heads, suggesting a vast open space—again so unlike our stairs at home, where the low ceiling over the stairs sloped at the same steep angle as the stairs (because another identical staircase led from the second floor to the attic, and everything had to be sandwiched together). I loved the grand, ceremonial, open feeling of the von Trapp family villa: its broad and sweeping arabesque lines, its color scheme of white and gold (only the white and gold baby grand piano in our living room evoked the interior of the von Trapp villa), its theatrical staircases, its high open spaces perfect for seeing and being seen, for watching and putting on shows.

Everything, in fact, that the von Trapp children did, every move they made, had a theatrical quality to it. When Maria first meets them, for example, they march in single file from oldest to youngest, tallest to shortest, down the foyer’s elegant stairs (we’re supposed to think that they’re having a terrible time, marching rigidly like that, but it looked like fun to me); and when it’s thundering and lightning, one after another, as if they’d rehearsed it, they race into Maria’s bedroom seeking shelter. And then when Uncle Max comes for a visit, he presents them with their very own marionette theater! We got a marionette theater, too, for Christmas one year, only ours was much smaller than the von Trapps’, and eventually we had to throw our marionettes away because they got so tangled up we couldn’t use them anymore; and anyway we never really figured out how to work them properly, whereas the von Trapps manage to put on a perfect show the first time they try it, and to the perfect tune of “The Lonely Goatherd.” (Why couldn’t it have been like that in our house?)

While the picture shows the children singing good night to the party guests, to me it was about the excitement of getting to stay up late, of getting to see how adults behaved at night after you had gone to bed—only the difference was, you were still awake to see it! The von Trapp children feel that same excitement when, in an earlier, magical scene (made possible by widescreen cinematography), they stand in one of the tall,
widely spaced doorways that open from the brightly lit, gold-encrusted ballroom onto the garden and patio, in the gauzy night air, and watch the elegantly dressed adults inside dancing the Laendler, a traditional Austrian folk dance:

BRIGITTA: The women look so beautiful.
KURT: I think they look ugly.
LOUISA: You just say that because you're scared of them.
KURT: Silly! Only grown-up men are scared of women.
GRETL: I think the men look beautiful.
LOUISA: How would you know?
[Gretl gives her a look of mock-disdain.]

Seen through the open doorways, the adults inside look like dainty figurines delicately turning on tiny spindles before the open lid of a music box, or like pirouetting shadows cast on a screen, the darkness of the garden in contrast with the blazing lights of the ballroom evoking the cool, dark, and dreamlike space of a movie theater with its projector rolling.

Although the blurb corresponding to this image in the soundtrack's storybook describes the scene inaccurately—"the children, who have been watching the dancing from the stairs, sing their goodnights" (they were watching the dancing from the patio, not the stairs)—it correctly identifies the basic fantasy enshrined in this scene: whereas "bedtime" means reluctantly having to mount a set of stairs, the rules of bedtime are now happily suspended. This is probably one reason why, some years later, I became enamoured of Hello, Dolly! in which, at the climax of that film, Dolly descends a staircase: when you're a child, the only time you ever get to come downstairs at night is when, having been banished to your bedroom, all of a sudden, you're invited to come back downstairs again and join the party—Dolly's descent felt like that. Maybe all scenes involving stairways in film musicals—and there are dozens—are meant to evoke this childhood bedtime drama? After all, in The Sound of Music, before going off to bed Louisa asks her father, "I'd like to stay and taste my first champagne—yes?" ("No," he replies.)

On New Year's Eve of 1967, my parents took all of us to a party at the house of their friends the Horners. I remember nothing of that occasion except that although I must have fallen asleep long before the stroke of midnight, I was awakened by the tugging rise and fall of being held in my father's arms just as everyone was saying their good nights and he was carrying me, still wearing my party hat and holding a pom pom—I've seen a photograph of this—out into the frigid night, with the snow
falling down and the Horners' outside Christmas lights still blinking and
everyone saying so long, farewell, good night, good night . . .

In another picture, Maria kneels before the Reverend Mother, who in
turn looks down upon Maria benevolently, holding her hand (fig. 2).
It's the scene where Maria, upset because she realizes that she is in love
with Captain von Trapp, has returned to the convent thinking she is now
ready to take her final vows of chastity, obedience, and poverty:

    REVEREND MOTHER: You've been unhappy. I'm sorry.
    MARIA: Reverend Mother.
    REVEREND MOTHER: Why did they send you back to us?
    MARIA: They didn't send me back, Mother, I left.
    REVEREND MOTHER: Sit down, Maria. Tell me what happened.
    MARIA: Well I—I was frightened.
    REVEREND MOTHER: Frightened! Were they unkind to you?
    MARIA: Oh no—no, I—I was confused—I felt—I've never felt that way be-
before. I couldn't stay. I knew that here I'd be away from it—I'd be safe.
    REVEREND MOTHER: Maria, our abbey is not to be used as an escape.
    What is it you can't face?
    MARIA: I can't face him again.
    REVEREND MOTHER: [as if what Maria has just said is in some sense unnatural]
    Him? [to Sister Margaretta, who has been listening to the conversation all this
time] Thank you, Sister Margaretta. [Sister Margaretta leaves] Captain von
Trapp? Are you in love with him?
    MARIA: I don't know—I don't know—I—the Baroness said I was—she—
she said that he was in love with me, but I—I didn't want to believe it.
Oh there were times when we would look at each other. Oh, Mother, I
could hardly breath.
    REVEREND MOTHER: Did you let him see how you felt?
    MARIA: If I did, I didn't know it. That's what's been torturing me. I was
there on God's errand. To have asked for his love would have been
wrong. I couldn't stay, I just couldn't. I'm ready at this moment to take
my vows. Please help me.
    REVEREND MOTHER: Maria, the love of a man and a woman is holy, too.
You have a great capacity to love. What you must find out is how God
wants you to spend your love.
    MARIA: But I've pledged my life to God. I—I've pledged my life to His
service.
    REVEREND MOTHER: My daughter, if you love this man it doesn't mean
you love God less. No. You must find out. You must go back.
    MARIA: Oh Mother, you can't ask me to do this. Please let me stay, I beg
of you.
    REVEREND MOTHER: Maria, these walls were not built to keep out prob-
lems. You have to face them. You have to live the life you were born to live.

If only my mother or father had said (or sung!) that to me—about how our house wasn’t built to keep out problems, how we have to face our problems—when boys at school used to call me “faggot,” and then when I began to feel overwhelmed by my physical attraction to those same boys. If only I’d felt, like Maria, that I could seek safety from my sexuality in the places most familiar to me, the places where God dwelled—home, the church, Catholic school. If only my parents hadn’t been afraid to discuss those things openly with me, even if they like the Reverend Mother had insisted that I could never solve my problems by hiding from them at home. If only: The Sound of Music has always appealed to the part of me that wishes dreams could come true. For one of the amazing things about this scene was the way the Reverend Mother lovingly confronts Maria’s anxieties about her sexual identity. She acknowledges, to begin with, Maria’s unhappiness, whether or not she thinks Maria ought to be feeling that way and without even knowing why she’s unhappy: “you’ve been unhappy. I’m sorry.”

During my sophomore year in college, I started falling in love with my best friend Martin. The fears that I’d had ever since high school that I might be gay were coming true. One night my parents called me, as they regularly did, to say hello and see how I was doing. “How are you? What’s new?” my mom asked. I wasn’t sure how much she really wanted an answer to her questions.

“Oh, I’m not too good,” I began to say.

“Why not, honey?” she asked with a worried intensity.

“Oh, I don’t know...”

But before I got very far in trying to explain (though I wasn’t ready at that point to come out to her), she showered me with protestations of “Oh, honey, we all feel sad once in a while, but we just have to look on the bright side of things. Sure, there are days I don’t feel like getting out of bed” (were there, I suddenly wanted to know? Why don’t you tell me about that?), “but I do it anyway, and as the day goes on, I feel better, and I forget about my troubles—we all have to, you know. You can’t just sit and do nothing and feel sorry for yourself, honey. Talk to God when you’re feeling blue, that’s what I do, and it helps, it really does help. Okay? You know your father and I are always here for you and we love you—all of you kids—very much...” I remained silent.

The Reverend Mother asks tactful but pointed questions to find out what’s bothering Maria: “Why did they send you back to us?” “Tell me
...what happened.” “Were they unkind to you?” “What is it you can’t face?” “Are you in love with him?” And not only does she help Maria to admit that she is in love with a man, but she reassures Maria that loving a man is something good: “Maria, the love of a man and a woman is holy, too. You have a great capacity to love. . . . if you love this man it doesn’t mean you love God less.” Although this scene examines the tension between a woman’s love of God and her love for a man, not the tension between heterosexual and homosexual love, Maria’s love for the captain is so unexpected, so forbidden, and so seductive within the terms of the story that this might as well have been a gay coming out scene. It was always possible for me to hear in the Reverend Mother’s speech the simple promise that loving a man is good . . . if you are in love with a man it doesn’t mean that you are less the person you already are.

Although my parents and I never directly addressed the possibility of my being gay in the way that the Reverend Mother urges Maria to embrace the possibility that her calling might be a heterosexual rather than a celibate one, still when I was ready, finally, to come out, my parents were the first people I came out to. It was August of 1985, the summer after I graduated from Catholic University and one month before I was set to move to New York City to begin working as an editorial assistant in a publishing firm. I had just spent the weekend down at Catholic U., in Washington D.C., visiting my friend Patrick, who had also been my boyfriend for a few months during my senior year until he dumped me, having decided, he told me, that he wasn’t really gay after all. A full ten months after our breakup I still wasn’t over Patrick, and so I came home feeling dejected and lonely. I arrived, however, only to discover that my dad was planning to leave town that very night for a business trip and my mom was going with him, leaving me by myself for the next three days (by this time, none of my siblings lived at home anymore). I couldn’t bear the thought of being alone with myself and my feelings of unrequited love for Patrick for three whole days, so I began to cry.

“What’s wrong, honey?” my mom asked me.

“Oh, nothing,” I said, still crying.

“Yes there is something, tell me what it is.”

“Nothing,” I said, afraid to tell the truth but unable to conceal it any longer.

“If it were nothing, you wouldn’t be crying like this. Now, please, honey, tell us. What is it? You can tell us.”

I decided to fib.

“It’s my friend Robert. I’m feeling sad about him.” Robert was an acquaintance from college who at that time was dying of leukemia and whom I’d also seen the previous weekend in Washington. My mom had
met him at my graduation and so she knew about his illness, but she also knew that although I was fond of him, his illness—even his death—would not have affected me in quite this way.

Turning to my dad, she said, “Jack, you go without me, I can’t leave him here like this.”

“I’m not leaving either,” my dad said.

“I’m going to make a pot of coffee and we’re gonna go sit down in the living room and talk about this.

“No, I don’t want you to stay home because of me,” I protested.

“No, honey, we don’t mind at all. This is more important. We want to stay here with you. Now let’s go into the living room.”

What followed was the beginning of a long, uneven, sometimes unpleasant process of becoming reacquainted with one another, a process that continues to this day. Many—perhaps most—gay men come out to their parents having first developed some kind of support system of gay friends and lovers, but I came out to my parents in the same moment that I came out to myself and before knowing intimately anyone who was openly gay. I think I did it this way because, despite my parents’ limitations, in some sense I did experience home, family, and even the Church, as welcoming and loving. And this scene from The Sound of Music, where in the end the Reverend Mother sends Maria back into the arms of the man she fears but knows deep down she loves, would have confirmed in me that feeling from the very first time I saw it.

When I was a child, the first thing I decided I wanted to be when I grew up was a priest. Ideas about eternity, uphill struggles, self-sacrifice, and strong leadership had already been planted within me by the time I first saw The Sound of Music. My family made friends with certain of our parish priests, in particular Father Mike, who was handsome and extremely sweet-tempered, and who everybody said looked like me, or at least as though he could be my older brother, because we both had the same auburn hair and the same pattern of freckles on our faces. Mike was in his mid-twenties when he came to our parish and must have needed the security and the sense of belonging my family provided him. He seemed to be around a lot, joining us for summers at the beach in Ocean City, New Jersey, where his mother lived year round.

I haven’t seen Father Mike since he was transferred to another parish in 1970. The only concrete thing that I have left of him is a picture someone took of the two of us at his going away party in the cafeteria of our parish grade school, a picture I keep on the wall in my bedroom. Whoever took the picture—probably my dad—was adding to the myth that Mike and I were related in some fundamental way, a myth that I now cherish as I search for usable pieces of my past with which
to surround myself. In this five-by-seven-inch color photograph (fig. 4), Mike, seen in profile, stands at the back of the auditorium, intently observing something that is happening at the front of the room—it might have been someone paying tribute to him and his invaluable service to Sacred Heart Parish, his inspiring sermons, his appeal to young parishioners, and so on. He is holding what looks like a folded piece of paper, maybe his notes for the farewell speech he is about to give. There is a serious, almost frightened look in his eyes; he might have been thinking, "I don't ever want to leave this place. Where am I going? Will I make
new friends? How many times in my life will this happen to me, getting settled only to have to tear up my roots and start all over again?" He is dressed entirely in black—black pants, a black short-sleeved shirt and Roman collar, and a black leather belt. He has (easy for me to see this now) beautiful forearms covered in light-auburn hair and fleshy biceps just visible beneath his short-sleeves. The photographer has caught his shiny auburn hair and sideburns perfectly in the light. (Did I think then, in any way, that he was "sexy"? What does a six-year-old know about sex? I don’t remember what I felt for Mike, except that I’m pretty sure "I liked him," whatever that might have meant.) To his left and in the background of the picture, there are several long, cafeteria-style tables, covered in white paper tablecloths and decorated with green, red, and blue crepe paper flowers. I am sitting by myself on one of these tables, facing in the same direction as Mike, with the same serious, attentive look, holding a Coke cup. I’m wearing a short-sleeved dark blue shirt and dark blue pants with blueprint-style drawings of sailing ships all over them, my tiny pair of black shoes dangling a few feet off the floor, my auburn hair echoing Mike’s—right down to the faux sideburns cut around my ears. "Bookends," my parents liked to say about us when they looked at this picture, thinking how much of a matched pair we made.

My parents loved Father Mike’s sermons, and they even invited him to say mass at our house a few times, in the dining room. As years went by, they would often quote things they remembered him saying. In a letter I got from my mom a few years ago, she wrote, "a thought came to mind Tuesday evening of a time way back in the 60’s when you kids were little. We went to adult Education classes run by Fr. [Mike] and I remembered a point he made to the young adults who were there. He said, ‘you don’t have to find out if you are compatible with someone “below the waistline” —that’s already been proven, that 99 times out of 100 that works out. It’s whether you can get along “above the shoulders” that really counts.’ I never forgot that." Mom’s letter came in the wake of an argument we’d had the week before. I had gone back to my hometown of Reading to visit my parents for a few days, and while I was there my mother had inadvertently come across my diary and started reading it. She was shocked when she read about the sex I’d recently been having with my boyfriend, and she was upset that I’d acknowledged her anger at me for not having visited Reading in several months (to admit her anger about this would have meant admitting how drastically things have changed between us over the past several years, how much less we now trust each other). My mother’s letter to me, in which she quotes Father Mike as a way of expressing her disapproval of my sex life, reminds me that I know very little about Mike. What would he think of
me if he knew me today, no longer the sweet little redheaded boy who everyone said looked so much like him?

My mother’s letter reminds me, too, that the figures I’ve used in constructing a mythology for myself about who I am and where I came from (Mom and Dad, my siblings, Father Mike, the scene in *The Sound of Music* where Maria confesses her love of Captain von Trapp to the Reverend Mother, and many others) exceed my grasp, don’t do everything I want and need them to do for me, have a life of their own quite apart from the use to which I’ve put them, can in fact be used against me. And yet, without them, how else would I conceive of myself? What I’ve made of them is partly a fiction, but I can’t live without *some* kind of fiction about who I am. For one thing, I would never be able to communicate my sense of who I am to anyone else without some amount of cutting, pasting, editing, quoting, sampling, shaping, framing—that is, without some kind of fiction-making.

More than anything else, I was absorbed by the picture that served as the promotional image for *The Sound of Music*—the one that appeared on the cover of the soundtrack album as well as on the front page of its storybook (fig. 5). I don’t think I fully understood (a) that I was looking at a painting, not a photograph, and (b) that what appeared in the painting didn’t necessarily happen exactly that way in the film. In the picture we see Maria, the largest and central figure, her suitcase in one hand, her guitar in the other, bounding over the crest of a grassy hill. The seven children race up the hill behind her, all of them laughing joyously (the film’s promotional slogan was “The Happiest Sound in All the World”). Captain von Trapp stands off to the right, observing them with a disapproving look; a dog or a cat, it was hard to tell which, is huddled at his feet (in fact, my sense of perspective was faulty: it was neither a dog nor a cat, but a horse, farther off in the distance). On the left-hand side of the picture, a man rides a bicycle downhill, away from Maria and the children (a reference to the character of Rolf, Liesl’s somewhat androgynous, blond boyfriend, who delivers telegrams on his bike and later ends up in cahoots with the Nazis). We see a fountain on the left spurting a thin stream of white water; a statue on the right; from one end of the picture to the other, the top few stories and rooftops of buildings, denoting the city of Salzburg, massed in the valley out of which Maria and the children have sprung; and behind Salzburg, the purple, triangular Alps.

The picture held a perverse fascination for me because it looked like Maria and all seven children were covered with mud (the shadows on the characters’ faces and clothes were painted with colors that made them look “muddier” than actual shadows would appear). I couldn’t
Figure 5. Poster for *The Sound of Music*. 
quite understand why everybody was smiling when they were caked with mud from head to toe; I knew I would have hated to get mud on my face and hands and clothes. There was, of course, a scene in the movie where Maria and the children fall, *kerplunk!*, into a lake when their row­boat tips over, and although they get soaking wet, they laugh about it, so I could understand if they were shown in the picture all smiling and laughing and singing and soaking wet, all covered with mud from the lake. But if that, in fact, was what the picture was supposed to be showing, where was the lake? Where was the capsized row boat? And why wasn’t anyone’s hair wet?

That was another weird thing about this picture—the children’s hair. All the girls in the movie had long hair, but in the picture Brigitta, Marta, and Gretl seemed to have short, “boy” haircuts. True, they were pictured face forward, so perhaps they were wearing their long hair in ponytails and we just couldn’t see them; but that didn’t really explain the artist’s rendering, since Leisl and Louisa were also pictured face forward, and yet we could see their ponytails bouncing behind their heads. One result of this confusion for me was to wonder if these particular children—some of whom, like Leisl, even looked too old to be children—were somehow not the same children as the ones in the movie.

Perhaps the weirdest and most fascinating thing in the picture were Maria’s legs. Her dress was shown fluttering up above her knees because she was obviously doing some kind of a hop or a jump; one foot was raised higher than the other, and both were well off the ground (a flying nun? I knew all about that. I also knew that Julie Andrews had played Mary Poppins not long before she appeared in *The Sound of Music*, and I may have assumed that because she could fly in *Mary Poppins* she could also fly, by virtue of her outstretched guitar and carpetbag, in *The Sound of Music*, or maybe even that she could therefore fly in all of her movies, no matter who or what she played). But it was hard for me to tell which of Maria’s legs was in front of the other. It looked like her left leg was in front of her right, because we see her left knee clearly but not much of her right knee. Also, her left leg seemed less muddy, or less in shadow, than her right, which again would have suggested—even to someone like me not completely aware of how artists create the illusion of perspective—that her left leg was supposed to be in front of her right. But her left foot looked exactly the same size as her right, both shoes were the same muddy red color, and though her right foot was all brown while her left was brown and yellow (which might have suggested that the left foot was out in front of the other), still there was something about the way her left foot was drawn to match perfectly the curve of what would have been her
right calf that made me think that the left foot could have been either
behind, next to, or in front of the right leg—it was difficult to decide.
And the sky was an unnatural pea green.

Finally, at the upper-right-hand corner of the album sat the little RCA
dog (Nipper) looking into that thing that at the time I didn’t know was
an old-fashioned record player but which I nevertheless understood to
be something that hypnotized the dog in the way that music always hyp­
notized me. It never occurred to me not to imagine that the dog was
supposed to be me, even though I knew that animals and humans were
not the same species. I recognized something about myself in his dumb,
rapt attention, in the way he went around and around and around in
dizzy circles on the round, black record label.

II

My mother and I both love *The Sound of Music*, but for different reasons.
My favorite scene is probably the opening sequence of the film, leading
up to Julie Andrews’s rendition of the title song. I remember my mother
telling me once when I was a kid that her favorite scene is the one near
the end of the movie where the von Trapp family perform together in
the Salzburg music festival singing competition while secretly planning
to flee Austria, now occupied by the Nazis. I couldn’t understand why
this was her favorite scene; for one thing, as musical numbers go, it
was pretty staid—we see them just standing there, singing on stage. But
the particular thing my mother loved about this scene, she always said,
was when Captain von Trapp sings “Edelweiss” and loses his voice. He
stands alone before the audience, his guitar in hand: “My fellow Aus­
trians,” he announces, “I shall not be seeing you again, perhaps, for a
very long time. I would like to sing for you now a love song. I know you
share this love. I pray that you will never let it die.” He begins to sing
the heartbreaking waltz “Edelweiss” (the last song Rodgers and Ham­
merstein wrote together), and not far into the song his voice begins to
falter: “Edelweiss, Edel . . . ,” he quietly gasps. Maria, standing off to
the side with the children, out of the spotlight, sees that he is losing his
voice and goes to him, center stage, to pick up where he left off. She
then motions to the children to enter the spotlight and join her and the
captain. Finally, the captain gestures to the entire audience to join him
and his family in finishing the song.

I still wonder why my mother cares so much about this scene. In what
ways, for example, has she ever felt, over the forty-three years that she
and my dad have been married, that she had to support him in the
way that Maria here supports her husband? That is, assuming that my mother was identifying at this point with Maria as a woman, wife, and mother. In what ways have my parents needed each other in the way that Maria and the captain need each other in this scene, and why, though I know how much my parents love each other and always have—so they have always said—why don't I know much more than simply that about their love? Why do I know so little about the close, everyday texture of their love—the ups and downs, frustrations, ambivalences, hurts, and angers? (Why are there so many things we never talk about?) Could remembering, perhaps, how she once saved him, as Maria here saves the Captain, or how she continues to save him year after year, day after day (but save him from what?), make tears come into her eyes as they do when she even so much as describes this scene from *The Sound of Music*? (Even as a child I knew that men, apparently, sometimes thought of women as their saviors: in one scene, the captain assures the baroness, "I'd hardly call you a mere distraction, darling." "Well what would you call me, Georg?" she flirts. He answers, "Lovely, charming, witty, graceful, the perfect hostess, and—you're gonna hate me for this—in a way, my savior. . . . I would be an ungrateful wretch if I didn't tell you at least once that it was you who bought some meaning back into my life." And a little later, he gratefully tells Maria, "you brought music back into the house—I'd forgotten.")

But then, maybe my mother identifies not with the vocal competence of Maria, the effectively supportive wife and mother, but with the vocal crisis of Captain von Trapp, the crumbling, needy patriarch. But then who supported my mother through her trials and dark nights and public humiliations—through her vocal crisis? And what did that consist of? Who lent her a voice when she lost hers? When in her life has she ever felt voiceless?

Several years ago, my mother was diagnosed with throat cancer. She received radiation treatment on her throat, which rid her of the cancer but also severely damaged her voice box so that she couldn't speak for over a month, and to this day, though it is restored for the most part, her voice lacks the power it had before the treatment. It was extremely painful for me to see my mother unable to speak, reduced to the crudest of physical gestures to communicate her most basic needs, having to write things down on a pad of paper and, more often than not, settling for just leaving things unspoken because it would be too difficult to communicate through body language or it would take too long to write things out, and then her hand would grow tired from all the writing she had to do. It seemed to me that here was someone whose whole life was dedicated to taking care of other people—her husband, her six children, more re-
cently her ten grandchildren—and who asked relatively little for herself, and now she couldn't even do that. So much of her vocation in life has involved speaking kind and reassuring words to other people: singing lullabies into our baby ears as we drifted blissfully off to sleep (softly she would sing to me when I was a child, "Little lamb you're tired, / I know why you're blue, / Someone took your kiddy car away. / Better go to sleep now little man, / You've had a busy day. / You've been playing soldiers, / The battle has been won, / The enemy is out of sight. / Put away your soldiers, / And put away your guns, / The enemy is gone for tonight"); making promises that everything would be all right when someone had hurt our feelings; promising to pray for the sick; fasting in solidarity for someone if they were taking a test, or hoping for a mortgage to come through, or undergoing some difficulty, such as an operation. She fasted for me on the day of my Ph.D. qualifying oral examination and on the day of my dissertation defense, and she prayed for three months with special intentions for me after my boyfriend Gary died; she gave up eating Baby Ruth chocolate bars, her favorite, for nearly fifteen years for a friend of hers whose husband died in an automobile accident early on in their marriage and who had never, it seemed, fully recovered from the loss. Even when my mother's reassuring words and good intentions weren't enough to help the person in need or to solve the problem, as I often felt they weren't when I needed her support, the constancy with which she made her offerings was impressive, making you feel that if nothing else could save you, her unbending faith would.

I used to think we were the happiest family in the world. From a thousand little things I heard my parents say when I was a child, I came to believe that we were definitely "lucky." They would often distinguish our family from people who lived in California—for example, our distant California relatives who apparently had endless problems with their kids. My parents were under the general impression that life in California was more permissive, more wild, less conducive than the east coast to raising children and instilling in them the proper values. But only in certain places on the east coast: for example, New York was out of the question—a place to visit, maybe, but never to live in. We lived in the suburbs, and that was best. My parents would often say how none of us kids ever gave them any trouble. We were, all of us, healthy, thank God; all exceptionally good students. We were hard workers and good sports. All of my siblings were accomplished athletes: Mary Jo played field hockey; Sue played basketball and field hockey; Betsy played basketball and field hockey; John played football, baseball, and basketball; Karen played softball and field hockey; plus all of the girls were swimmers and
divers and two or three of them were also lifeguards at our local swimming pool. I hated sports and tried tennis one summer, partly because my parents thought if there was a sport for me, tennis would be it because it was, after all, a "gentleman’s sport," not a rough contact sport, and they knew how much I hated physical contact with other boys, and they said that tennis is a good way to have fun with another fella. But I didn’t like it enough to stick with it.

I believed we were lucky because, as I’d heard my parents say numerous times, they could afford to send us to Catholic school, and even though the tuition was expensive (what with already having to pay for the public schools through taxes—really, it wasn’t fair! Why should they have to pay two tuitions! They were being penalized for having strong family values!), still it was worth it to them because they wanted us to have a Catholic education. They wanted prayer to be a regular part of each day. That was the “climate,” as they put it, in which they wanted us to be educated, one that combined morals and ethics with reading, writing and science, one in which the mass was as important and recurrent an event as test-taking. They admitted that Catholic schools had fewer resources—less money for books and equipment, less money to pay good teachers (though often priests and nuns, who didn’t need teaching salaries, made the best teachers anyway). But, they reasoned, money does not a good education make—it’s the values implicit in the instruction, which, God knows, no amount of money, no rich endowment, no prestigious record for getting students accepted into top-flight colleges, can buy.

I was convinced that we had the best and brightest family in the world and would often try to figure out exactly what was the key factor in that happiness—the one ingredient without which I simply couldn’t be the absurdly happy child that I was, or at least that I sometimes thought I was. Was it the year in which I was born (1963), so that, for example, I could enjoy the splendor of the movie version of *The Sound of Music* but wouldn’t have been able to if I’d been born, say, in 1900 and died, tragically, just before the film came out in 1965? Was it having been born in America, so that I didn’t have to worry about things like bomb blasts, hunger, and floods? Or rather, was it having been born in suburban Pennsylvania (which meant “Penn’s woods,” because the Englishman William Penn came over from England and loved the landscape so much—the hills and trees and brooks—that he claimed them as his own and named them after himself, not unlike Maria in *The Sound of Music*, who refers to the mountain where we first catch sight of her as “my mountain”)—the suburbs, where there seemed to be many fewer problems than in, say, inner city Philadelphia (which we never visited,
except to pass through on our way every summer to the Jersey shore) or Detroit (where some of my cousins lived) or New York (where one of my unmarried aunts lived, and one of my older cousins, who seemed to me, even at my young age, to be gay)? Was it having been born Catholic, so that I knew the Truth about God and Jesus, about heaven and hell, in a way that, God forgive them, the Jews and Protestants just didn’t or maybe couldn’t or perhaps simply wouldn’t? Was it having been born the youngest of six children, so that I always had someone older to play with (if you could call the misery of being in the company of my older siblings “playing”)? Was it that I never had to worry about taking full responsibility for things like cooking or doing household chores? (I was designated the bedroom and bathroom trash can emptier, but that was easy because the cans were small and you only had to do it once a week; and besides, Mom or someone else would always do it for me if I forgot or if I just didn’t feel like doing it.) Was it that I never had to worry about getting from place to place on my own? (There was always an older brother or sister available to lead the way or someone with a car to take me where I wanted to go, when I wanted to go there.)

Or was it the fact that I had auburn hair, which everyone said was so pretty and which got me so much attention when I was a kid, even from perfect strangers?

Or was it, I wondered, all of these things, and more?

In the summer of 1976 when I was thirteen, I helped baby-sit the children of some friends of our family, the Freymoyers, down on Long Beach Island, New Jersey for a few days. It was one of the rare occasions that I went somewhere without the rest of my family. One night I stayed up late talking to Mrs. Freymoyer after her kids had gone to bed. Mrs. Freymoyer and I may have been playing a game of Life or doing a puzzle or maybe just sitting around talking, which was one of the things I liked so much about her: she was younger than my mother and she always asked me lots of questions; she seemed to love nothing better than to talk hours on end with people, even young people, whom you wouldn’t think an adult could find anything in common with, but she always did. She was asking me about my family. She had come from a small family—so did both of her parents—and she and her husband only had two kids of their own, so the idea of a big brood like the one I came from was fantastically alien to her (she was amazed to learn that I had forty-two first cousins, and that was just on my father’s side of the family! I used to love to tell people that and then watch their look of astonishment). I remember singing my family’s praises to her in a way that I had never done before to anyone, perhaps because I’d never been so conscious until just then of the fact that, indeed, I had a comparatively
large family. I was also feeling a little homesick, despite the fact that Mrs. Freymoyer did probably as much as anyone could have to make me feel secure, welcome, and at home.

"I feel really lucky to have such a big family," I said. "With the exception of me and my sister Karen, who is two years older than me, all of my other siblings are one year apart. So we're really close."

"Your poor mother!" Mrs. Freymoyer exclaimed. "Having babies for six years in a row! How did she survive being pregnant all those years?"

Everyone always asked that question.

"I don't know. She had some back trouble during some of her pregnancies, but she says that she and my dad would have had more children after me if they had been able to. They seem to love children more than anything else in the world."

"Is that right! Well, what's it like to have all those older brothers and sisters?"

What's it like? No one had ever asked me such a question. It's not like anything, was my initial thought, it's just the way it is. But how is it? What makes being part of this family different from being part of some other family or from not having a family at all? Rather than think too deeply about it, I fell back on the kind of thing I usually told people.

"I love it. I never have to worry about having someone to play with."

"Do you get along with your brother and sisters?"

"Uh huh."

"That's amazing. I used to fight like crazy with my sister and my parents. I couldn't wait until I was old enough to go to college and get out on my own. I mean, I can appreciate my sister now, and of course my parents are both dead, but I just wanted to be on my own so badly and do things my way. I guess I've never been a team player, and so I wonder how you manage with your big family. What makes your family so cohesive? The truth is I envy you, Patrick."

I usually liked it when people envied me for my big, happy family. But Mrs. Freymoyer wasn't just complimenting me on my family to be polite, and she wasn't speaking superficially. I could see that she was trying to understand something for herself, and she was giving me permission to do the same—to make conversation not as a way of filling the air with received wisdom or rehearsing conventional pieties (like most of the conversation around my house) but as a means toward deeper, critical insight into whatever it was that I felt I needed to explore. But what did I need to explore? Did I dare tell her that my family wasn't always as happy as we liked to say we were? We never said anything bad about the family to people outside the family. Whenever anyone asked, "How's Betsy?" or "How's Suzanne?" or "How's [some other member of the family]," we
would always say, "Oh, she's fine," or "Oh, he's just great," and we would proceed to rattle off a list of his or her most recent accomplishments. But things weren't always fine and we weren't always just great. As far as I could tell, there were goings-on in my family that no one wanted to talk about. For example, one of my sisters seemed to have an eating disorder. Another of my sisters was so unhappy with her weight, her appearance in general, that she used to pluck out her eyelashes. And from about the time I was eight, I developed the habit of pulling out locks of hair from my scalp, causing a bald spot to develop on top of my head that was increasingly visible to everyone. I was always amazed at how kids at school felt entitled to just walk up to me and brazenly say, with an insincere gasp, "[gasp!] You have a bald spot on top of your head!" But apparently the humiliation of having my bald spot pointed out to me and the damage I was doing to my appearance wasn't strong enough to deter me from ripping out my hair (and always with that tiny pin-prick of pleasure every time a knot of hair was torn away from the scalp!). I found out that my third grade teacher said something about it to my parents because she found little knots of red hair all over the floor around and underneath my desk, and our cleaning lady, too (she came twice a week), found knots of my hair around the house, hidden under chairs or behind the sofa, and would from time to time alert my mom to this. But I don't remember the conversations, if any, that I had about it with my parents, except that my mom told me periodically not to pull out my hair because I had such a beautiful head of hair and it was a shame to do that to it.

For as long as I can remember I didn't like myself, and I must have learned to feel that way in part from cues I was getting at home. I could tell that my parents vaguely disapproved of something about me—the way I walked, was that it? The sound of my voice—was that it? My mother was always telling me to stick out my chest and throw back my shoulders when I sat at the table or when she would happen to see me just standing around somewhere. And she would say it in a low tone of voice that presaged doom: "Patrick Horrigan, sit up straight."

When I would answer the telephone, the voice on the other end would invariably say without hesitation, "Peggy—." They thought I was my mother because my voice sounded feminine.

"Just a minute, I'll get her."

When my mother would take the phone from my hand, and the other person, assuming I was mortified, would apologize for having called me "Peggy" (it was universally understood to be a crime to mistake a boy for his mother), she would pretend that it was she, not I, whose gender identity had been called into question: "I know," she would joke, as much directing her comment to me as to her friend, "I have a deep
voice. I sound like a man. . . . [with a brisk laugh] Oh, it's no problem at all! But now, how are ya? I haven't talked to you in ages!" (By contrast, the sound of a girl's voice issuing from a boy's mouth was greeted with warmth and affection in *The Sound of Music:* at one point during the von Trapp children's performance of "So Long, Farewell," Kurt lip-synchs the second syllable of "good-bye" while one of his sisters supplies the impossibly high note, at which point Captain von Trapp smiles and gives Kurt a friendly wave of the hand.)

But I couldn't explain any of this to Mrs. Freymoyer. It was enough that she was interested in learning about my family and in what I had to say about them. The only language I had for speaking about my family was the one I inherited from my parents: "We are happy and good and everything is fine. Period."

"My favorite thing in the whole world is Christmas Eve, when all of us kids exchange gifts with each other after going to midnight mass," I told Mrs. Freymoyer. (She was nonreligious, and I sometimes liked to make people who weren't practicing Catholics feel like they were missing out on something.) "The other thing I love is going to the shore with my family every summer."

"I don't suppose you have your own room."

What was she getting at? Each of her kids had their own room, which seemed like a strange luxury to me.

"No. I share a room with my brother."

"Do you get along with your brother?" That question again.

"Yeah. Pretty much. I mean, I can't do all the things he can, like he's a really good athlete, and I can't do stuff like that. He plays baseball and basketball and football and tennis and a million other things. He's a junior in high school. He's on the student council."

"What kinds of things do you and your brother do together?"

"Well, we don't really do that much together." (But I mustn't betray him or my family. John is my brother! I love John! John loves me!) "When I was born he was so excited that one day he picked me up out of my crib and carried me downstairs to show me to the milkman. My parents were afraid that he would drop me because he was only three years old."

"Oh, how sweet! He must have been so happy to finally get a brother after having all those sisters."

"Yeah." I thought for a moment. "But we don't really have much in common."

"Does he play an instrument?"

"No." (But I mustn't betray him or my family.) "My sisters do, though. Mary Jo and Sue play the piano, and Betsy and Karen play the guitar!"

"Wow! That's wonderful. I guess you can have concerts right in your own home!"
"Yeah."
"Have you ever done that—played a duet with you on the piano and one of your sisters on the guitar?"
"No."
"Oh, you should try it sometime! I used to play the piano with my friend Lucy, and she played the flute, and we had such wonderful times! And we would sing too! My god, we weren't very good singers, but we had fun. We would try to sing Beatles songs! We were madly in love with Paul McCartney, even though he was a little too young for us at that point!"
"Oh, we've never done that."
"So what do you do when you want to be by yourself? Where do you go in that big house full of brothers and sisters?" Another question no one had ever asked me. I never thought of the hours I spent by myself (painting, building model houses and airplanes, listening to records, playing the piano, playing with Lego, bouncing a ball on the driveway, playing by myself in the woods near our house, talking to myself whenever I found a place where no one could hear me) as having any kind of integrity or reason for being. I never imagined that a person might actually need to separate themselves from their family from time to time, maybe even for a long time, maybe even for a lifetime.
"Well, I guess sometimes I play by myself, but—"
"What do you do when you're by yourself?"
I ran my fingers through my hair and felt the bald spot underneath my fingers.
"Some of the things I like to do you can't really do when you're with another person . . ."
"Like what?"
I didn't know where to begin.

If someone had asked me when I was twelve or thirteen what I loved about The Sound of Music, I might have said something about the way Maria teaches the children to sing "Do Re Mi" and dance with complete abandon around the city of Salzburg and the local countryside. But now I think that The Sound of Music must have meant more to me even than that, though I still think that is pretty momentous. For although on the surface my family resembled the von Trapp family in its size, its relative number of girls and boys, and its more or less sunny public disposition, especially once Maria had arrived and taught the children to sing, there were also grimmer, more serious undercurrents running through the von Trapp children's life at home that must have echoed the uglier realities of life in my household as well. I suspect one of the things about Maria that was so compelling to me as an adolescent was not just her
winning personality and the guarantee that life in her presence could become a song and dance at any moment, but—just as important—in one crucial scene she told the Captain the truth about the unhappiness each of his children felt deep down:

CAPTAIN: Do you mean to tell me that my children have been roaming about Salzburg dressed up in nothing but some old drapes?
MARIA: Mm hm. And having a marvelous time.
CAPTAIN: They have uniforms—
MARIA: Straitjackets, if you'll forgive me.
CAPTAIN: I will not forgive you for that.
MARIA: The children cannot do all the things they're supposed to if they have to worry about spoiling their precious clothes.
CAPTAIN: I haven't heard them complain yet.
MARIA: Well they wouldn't dare! They love you too much—they fear you too much.
CAPTAIN: I do not wish you to discuss my children in this manner.
MARIA: Well you've got to hear from someone. You're never home long enough to know them.
CAPTAIN: I said I don't want to hear any more from you about my children!
MARIA: I know you don't, but you've got to! Now take Liesl—
CAPTAIN: You'll not say one word about Liesl, Fraulein.
MARIA: She's not a child anymore. One of these days you're going to wake up and find she's a woman. You won't even know her. And Friedrich—he's a boy, but he wants to be a man like you and there's no one to show him how.
CAPTAIN: Don't you dare tell me about my son!
MARIA: Brigitta could tell you about him if you'd let her get close to you, she notices everything. And Kurt . . .
CAPTAIN: [interrupting her] Fraulein—
MARIA: . . . pretends he's tough not to show how hurt he is when you brush him aside . . .
CAPTAIN: [interrupting again] That will do!
MARIA: . . . the way you do all of them.
CAPTAIN: I said, that will do!
MARIA: Louisa I don't know about yet, but someone has to find out about her, and the little ones just want to be loved. Oh please Captain, love them. Love them all!
CAPTAIN: I don't care to hear anything further from you about my children!
MARIA: I am not finished yet, Captain!
CAPTAIN: Oh yes you are, Captain!
[María suppresses a smile at his faux pas.]

On one level, I could best see my own particular situation in that of the von Trapp boys, Friedrich and Kurt, while on another, there was at
least something Maria said about each of the children, boys and girls alike, that I felt was true for me too. It was true, there were times when I felt my father brush me aside, like the captain brushes Kurt aside, and it would hurt me just like it did Kurt (even though we never exactly witness in the film any of the particular infractions on the captain’s part that Maria accuses him of here, indicating—though I couldn’t have known this when I was young—how routine we take this kind of neglect to be within families and how we don’t even need to see evidence of it to believe that it exists. It’s as if we feel, of course fathers brush their sons aside and don’t teach them who they ought to be, of course fathers are never home long enough to get to know their children, of course children suffer in silence, and so on, even if it’s not 100 percent true).

For example, once when I was practicing the piano and getting particularly ardent about the Brahms rhapsody that I was learning (op. 79, no. 2; “Molto passionato, ma non troppo allegro”—to be played “very passionately, but not with too much liveliness”), my dad was sitting in the living room listening to me and reading a magazine—my memory now tells me it was Forbes, but I could be just making that up. As I filled the room with as much of the romantic drama as I could squeeze out of my Brahms rhapsody (I wasn’t “banging,” as my siblings liked to complain—and then they would bang the door shut between the living room and the den, where they sat watching TV—I was soaring!, in the same way that the camera and Julie Andrews’s voice soar at the beginning of The Sound of Music\(^5\)), my dad rustled his magazine and said, “Does it have to be so loud? Can’t you tone it down a little?”

“No!” I cried, suddenly out of all patience with him, “I’m playing it exactly how it’s written,” which wasn’t true; “it’s supposed to be played like this!” And I got up brusquely and stomped out of the room and ran upstairs and slammed my bedroom door behind me so hard I scared myself and accidentally knocked one of my brother’s trophies off its shelf.

And Maria told the Captain that Friedrich had “no one to show him” how to be a man. That was illuminating to me, not because I consciously thought I needed to learn from some other man how to become like him, but because it spoke the truth about gender as I was living it out day after day: you’re not just born a man or a woman, a boy or a girl; you have to be taught how to be one, and your parents are supposed to teach you how, and often they don’t. Like Friedrich, I wasn’t, it seemed, learning how to be a man. For example, on the night that The Sound of Music premiered on television in February of 1976, my parents and I were caught in traffic coming home from a Philadelphia Phillies game and I was losing my mind at the thought of missing even one minute of the film.

My dad always got us exclusive seats in the Bank of Pennsylvania Superbox because his company did business with the bank. In the Super-
box you could watch the baseball game on a big color TV in the private, air-conditioned lounge if it was too hot to sit outside in the seats; there was an open bar with a meat, vegetable, fruit, and cheese buffet that was replenished by the waitress every fifteen minutes or so, and then everything from chocolate cake to banana splits for dessert; plus a private bathroom so you didn’t have to wait in line in one of those big, smelly public men’s rooms along with everybody else. This was great for me because I was—and still am for the most part—irreparably pee shy, and no matter how bad I had to go, if there was even just one person standing behind me waiting his turn at the urinal, I’d never in a million years be able to do it; so that was another reason why I liked the Superbox. I had no real taste for baseball, but I felt if I had to watch a baseball game, it might as well be from the Superbox.

On the night of The Sound of Music TV premiere, however, it was all I could do to conceal my impatience with baseball. I complained persistently about the traffic the whole way home. It seemed cosmically unfair that on this night of all nights (a) I had to be dragged off to a baseball game in Philadelphia, which my parents had promised me would be over in plenty of time for us to get home to watch The Sound of Music but then looked like it wouldn’t be, and (b) I had to get stuck in traffic on the way home, and then I got really annoyed with my mom when she insisted that it didn’t matter if I missed the first half hour or so of the movie since I’d already seen it at least three times in the movie theater, and how many times did I have to see The Sound of Music anyway? I practically knew the whole thing by heart as it is! How could I be so ungrateful, when your father gets you superbox tickets to a Philadelphia Phillies game at Veterans Stadium? Do you know how many boys would love to have such good seats? And all you can think about is rushing home in time to watch some movie on TV! (“Some movie on TV??” I thought to myself, floored by the understatement.) “I like The Sound of Music too,” my mom would concede, “but my life doesn’t revolve around it! I mean, let’s put things into perspective!”

All of this meant, somehow, that I wasn’t learning to act the way a boy ought to act (preferring Hollywood musicals to baseball games and making a big fuss over it), and that, like Friedrich in The Sound of Music, I needed and lacked someone to teach me how I should be acting. But lacking an effective masculine role model also implied that whatever was supposedly wrong with me wasn’t all my fault—which, if that were true, would have dealt a major blow to the fantasy that we were the happiest, most perfect family in the world. I had already become accustomed to holding together in my mind the contradictory ideas that, on the one hand, my family was perfect and that, on the other, I deviated from the
family norm—in a sense, I believed that I was not an integral part of this perfect family, that I was only supplemental to it. But Maria’s argument that Captain von Trapp was implicated in his children’s suffering encouraged me to see myself as perhaps still damaged, but belonging nonetheless. For she argued, in effect, that the problems in the von Trapp family were systemic, not isolated to this or that particular, deviant child. And so if I was both deviant and a fully entitled member of my family, then the same was true of my father and every other member of the family! That thought came to me as somewhat of a relief.

Captain von Trapp, Maria said, would “wake up one day and find [Liesl] a woman” and not know who she is anymore. It was amazing to think of one’s parents as fallible, as being too blind to notice something. But, of course, at times, my parents did nothing but not notice things about me—about all of us, about the whole world around us—or rather, their love for us made them notice things about us and about our environment only selectively.

Then there was Louisa. Maria felt an obligation toward even the child she knew least: “Louisa I don’t know about yet, but someone has to find out about her.” Maria’s duty as a “parent,” it seemed, was precisely to get to know each child as an individual. It was stunning to think that different children in the same family could actually have different personalities and therefore different needs that parents might understand only partially—that children, according to Maria, were in some significant way different from their parents and from each other and that this was something to be acknowledged and respected, not minimized or denied.

And it was thrilling, how Maria said that Brigitta—one of the middle children, and a girl—was the one who “notices everything.” But her father wouldn’t “let her get close” to him. I wasn’t exactly sure what “being close” to a father entailed, but dimly it occurred to me that I might not be as close to my father as I might deserve, or wish, to be.

(Things have changed somewhat between my father and me over the last several years. An accumulation of events, major and minor, some of them disastrous—my mother’s bout with cancer, my boyfriend Gary’s suicide, and, in a less obvious but, I think, still profound way, the constant challenge over the past fifteen or so years of getting to know me now not just as his grown son but as his grown gay son—all these things have made my dad more physically and emotionally present to me than ever before. When my dad called to tell me about my mother’s cancer, he wept audibly and unashamedly and didn’t rush to hang up the phone to conceal his grief; when Gary died, my dad drove me to the funeral in New Jersey, stayed by my side the whole time, and kissed and hugged
my friends, even though he had only once, briefly, met Gary and, until
Gary's death, knew almost nothing about our relationship.)

III

I started taking piano lessons when I was five, around the same time
that I first saw *The Sound of Music*. I don't remember thinking that my
piano teacher, Mrs. Hasbrouck, was anything like Maria in *The Sound of
Music*—Mrs. Hasbrouck and Maria didn't look or act like each other at
all—but the story of a woman who transforms the inner lives of seven
sad, angry children through the agency of music must have resonated in
my mind with the relationship that was developing between Mrs. Has-
brouck and me. Although Maria eventually becomes the von Trapp chil-
dren's mother, she never really behaves like a mother, at least not in the
way I thought mothers were supposed to behave. Maria was more like
a fun baby-sitter—like Janie Distelhorse, the daughter of friends of my
parents, who used to baby-sit us occasionally during the late sixties and
early seventies. Almost everything that came out of Janie's mouth made
me laugh. She was particularly good at playing zany language games
and making up goofy names for us—she named me "Patrikimus," which
my brother, for years afterward, shortened to "The Mus" and eventually
just "Mus" (rhymes with "puss"). Mrs. Hasbrouck, on the other hand,
was even older than my mother—she was practically old enough to be
my grandmother. While Maria was girlish in her shiny, auburn page boy
haircut, Mrs. Hasbrouck had soft, curly white hair and wore glasses.
Maria was agile and bursting with energy: on her way to meet the von
Trapps, she sings "I Have Confidence." As she sings, with her carpetbag
in one hand and her guitar in the other, she trips, skips, kicks up her
heels, runs down the street and gets all out of breath and then pulls her-
self together and is ready for more. Mrs. Hasbrouck, on the other hand,
was deliberate and slow. For most of our time together, we sat. And as
the years went by, Mrs. Hasbrouck's step grew more and more hesitant.
Sometimes I would walk her home after my lesson—her apartment was
across the street from the mall where she taught. She would hold onto
my arm the way frail old people do. Although I was happy to walk with
her, once I had delivered her safely to her door I would run full speed
back to the parking lot where I'd left my car, just because I needed to
let loose. (My mom frequently tells a story about her friend Annette who
was walking across a lawn one day with her five- or six-year-old daughter
Katie. They came to a hedge, and instead of walking all the way around
the hedge, as Annette would usually have done, Annette just jumped
over the hedge. Katie rejoiced: "Now that's the kind of mother I want!"
Whenever my mom wants to joke with me about how she struggles to stay “with it,” or how there are some things she just can’t bring herself to do no matter how much I might want her to do them, she tells that story.

When Maria tries to teach the von Trapp children to sing, they’re puzzled at first. They don’t understand the meaning of notes and scales (do re mi fa so la ti) until Maria makes up a song that explains it all: “Doe—a deer, a female deer . . .” and so on. Thereafter, the children sing, dance, and harmonize unbidden. They even jump up and down, forward and backward, on a flight of stairs, in perfect synchronicity with the music they are singing, just like notes arranged on a staff—they don’t just learn music, they become music incarnate (in so many ways, like Maria).

It was more complicated with me and Mrs. Hasbrouck. My parents noticed my interest in the piano when I was three or four. Mary Jo and Suzanne were already taking lessons with Mrs. Hasbrouck, and I would try to imitate them at the piano. Somehow I started playing renditions of songs they weren’t practicing, like “Sons of God,” a folk-style church hymn that was popular in Vatican II-era Catholic churches in the late sixties. Immediately my parents took me to see Mrs. Hasbrouck, and although her policy had always been that a child isn’t ready to start playing until he turns eight, she agreed to take me on, impressed by my eagerness to play and my ability to play by ear. I was a deceptively fast learner. Mrs. Hasbrouck would play a piece for me, and I would pretty much play it back to her. Soon she realized that I wasn’t reading the notes—I was imitating what I’d heard her play. She decided that if I was ever going to learn to read music, I would have to work out the notes for myself without the benefit of first hearing how the piece was supposed to sound. It took me over six years to learn to read music, and even then I was a slow reader (I still am).

While playing the piano never came as easily to me as singing did to the von Trapp children, in other ways it was just as magical a carpet ride to another world. For music was an alternative language; if I couldn’t change the way things worked within the tight structure of my family, at least I could learn about other ways of structuring the universe and inhabit those structures whenever I practiced the piano. And the bond that grew between me and Mrs. Hasbrouck was, ultimately, as revolutionary as the bond between Maria and her adoptive children. Quite apart from the business of my lesson, Mrs. Hasbrouck and I enjoyed talking to each other, and we talked about all kinds of things. She was one of the first people in my life who fulfilled my need for intelligent, mutually rewarding conversation (Mrs. Freymoyer was another), the kind of conversation I felt there wasn’t enough of at home. She once told me a
story about how, several years earlier, sometime in the early 1970s, she had been sitting on a bench one afternoon in Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park when along came a very distinguished-looking old gentleman who sat down next to her on the bench. It was Richard Rodgers.

“Did you say anything to him?” I gasped with excitement.

“Oh no, people like that usually don’t want to be recognized in public by total strangers. Besides I’m not the biggest fan of musicals in the world, as you know, Mr. Horrigan.”

I giggled. I knew she wasn’t.

“But he seemed like a sweet man. It was nice just to see him there.”

“Was Hammerstein with him?”

“Oh dear no, he’s been dead since . . . I think he died in 1960. No, he was with a nurse or a companion or maybe it was his daughter. I don’t know.”

“Wow.”

Nor was Mrs. Hasbrouck all that fond of The Sound of Music: “I think it trivializes the history of Germany’s takeover of Austria and the spread of Nazism throughout Europe. Not once does that film mention the Jews, and when the von Trapps escape to Switzerland, it’s as if we’re supposed to forget about all the people who didn’t escape the Nazis. Plus, I find the idea of a singing nun a little bit ludicrous. And I especially don’t like the captain in that movie. I’m very fond of Christopher Plummer as an actor. He’s a great Shakespearean actor.” (I had no idea.) “But the Captain von Trapp is just a cardboard figure of a man. I don’t find him to be much of a character at all.”

I was puzzled by Mrs. Hasbrouck’s criticism of the captain. The idea of an emotionally crippled, often physically absent father, if that’s what she meant by “cardboard,” apparently made such perfect sense to me that I hardly noticed the captain’s deficiencies at all, or if I did, I never imagined that he might have been any different. To me, his presence—his absent presence—was simply a given, one of the basic conditions of a story about children finding themselves through the love and music of a surrogate mother figure. If Christopher Plummer’s performance was “cardboard,” wasn’t he just performing the role as it should be? Weren’t all fathers—all men—more or less cardboard figures in the lives of women and children? It was strange but interesting to imagine Mrs. Hasbrouck wanting the captain to be more of a man, as if there were anything more in being a man than the little that Christopher Plummer demonstrated, and as if that could in any way be considered a good thing. Apparently Mrs. Hasbrouck didn’t think all men were alike or that they were all as bad as Captain von Trapp. Hmm!

The majority of the music Mrs. Hasbrouck taught me was “classical”
(Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Debussy, Ravel, Rachmaninoff, Prokofief), but she also let me branch out occasionally into Broadway show music. After I saw Sweeney Todd, with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, on Broadway in 1979, I became an instant and obsessive admirer of Sondheim's music. I bought a collection of songs from his shows, which Mrs. Hasbrouck and I worked through. I don't think even Sondheim's music interested her very much, though she did seem to recognize his importance in the history of the Broadway musical (how, with musicals like Company [1970], Follies [1971], and Pacific Overtures [1976], he and his collaborators succeeded in integrating book, music, lyrics, choreography, and production design into a single overarching concept; at the time I was reading all about it in a big, glossy, coffee-table book on the subject, Broadway Musicals [1979] by Martin Gottfried, that I'd gotten for Christmas that year). As we rehearsed selections from the Sondheim songbook, Mrs. Hasbrouck remarked, "his music is more complex than most Broadway show music. Some of it is very pretty. I can see why his musicals are not always popular or successful. You don't exactly go around humming these songs, do you?"

"No," I answered, and proceeded to lecture her on the importance of Sondheim's innovations in Sweeney Todd—how, for example, the score was really more like opera and how the chorus at times commented on the action as would the chorus of an ancient Greek drama (I'd just written a paper about it in my eleventh grade English class). Mrs. Hasbrouck seemed to see Sweeney Todd my way. "Yes," she said, "it is like opera and very clever. And I must say I prefer this music to Gilbert and Sullivan, whom I really can't stand. All that oom pah pah, oom pah pah, and those silly Victorian love stories."

"And Stephen Sondheim uses songs dramatically in ways that don't seem to fit the way the songs sound or what the words are about, like in Sweeney Todd, when Sweeney sings 'Pretty Women,' about how beautiful and graceful and touching women are, and he sings it as a duet with Judge Turpin who is sitting in the barber chair getting a shave from Sweeney, and it's this gorgeous melody, but really Sweeney is preparing, as he sings, to slit the judge's throat, and he's using the song to lull the judge to sleep so he can murder him!"

"I see. Very interesting," Mrs. Hasbrouck would say. Then, looking at the Stephen Sondheim songbook, with the photograph of Sondheim on the cover, one last time before we turned back to our main business for the week—it might have been Ravel's "Pavane (Pour une infante defunte)," the dirge for a dead princess—she said, "he is quite a handsome man."
Was he? I wondered. I'd never thought of adult men as attractive, though there was a picture of Sondheim in my copy of the *Sweeney Todd* souvenir program—from when he was in his early thirties, with longish hair, his brooding, unsmiling face hidden mostly in shadow—that I thought looked thrillingly demonic, as I felt the face of the composer of *Sweeney Todd* should look. I became momentarily aware of how standards of physical beauty varied from person to person, and how women who were attracted to men looked at them.

I was pleasantly surprised to discover that although she thought little of Broadway musicals in general and only slightly more of the works of Stephen Sondheim, Mrs. Hasbrouck did have the Broadway cast album of *Pacific Overtures*, possibly Sondheim's most obscure and eccentric, and certainly his least successful, show to date. Mrs. Hasbrouck and her husband were interested in all things Japanese (*Pacific Overtures* is a kabuki-style musical about Commodore Perry's infamous trip to Japan in 1854, which succeeded in forever exposing Japanese culture to what the show styles as the pernicious influence of Western values), and their cast album of *Pacific Overtures* had been a gift from their son Allan. Mrs. Hasbrouck was, in fact, one of the lucky people to have seen the show in 1976 before it closed after just a few performances. She lent the album to me, and I liked it so much that for Christmas the following year she bought me my own copy. I showed it to some of my friends from high school one night, knowing they would think it strange and partly wanting them to think it strange (for at least in that way I would get their attention). Predictably, they laughed at the actors' funny names like Mako, Yuki Shimoda, and Sab Shimono, so obviously not “big names” (I laughed along with them because from their point of view, I could see, it was comical). Broadway musicals were already a laughingstock among most kids my age, and Japanese-style Broadway musicals all the more so. But my best friend Beth, at least, took it as still more evidence that I was smarter and subtler than the rest of our friends. (At least twice a year during high school, Beth and I took day trips to New York City to see shows and soak up as much “big city life” as we could before getting back on the bus to Reading.)

The cast album of *Pacific Overtures* was one of several things Mrs. Hasbrouck gave me during the thirteen years I studied full-time with her—queer little tokens of her affection.

Frequently during my lesson, Mrs. Hasbrouck would suck on smooth, highly aromatic white candies the size and shape of small bird eggs, which she called “violets” because they had the strange, almost nauseating taste of purple—not grape, but sheer purple. They came in an elegant
cardboard box covered in satiny white paper attractively decorated with flowers. She bought them somewhere in one of the ladies' departments at Wanamakers, which was the main department store in our local mall. She would always offer me one of these candies, and I would take one—and one was always enough. I'm not sure if I liked or disliked the taste, but they were unusual, and I definitely liked that. Once Mrs. Hasbrouck either bought me a whole box for myself or, more likely, gave me her box, which my mother could smell when she came to pick me up after my lesson as soon as I got into the car, even though I had held them pressed against my shirt with my music books (I held books in my arms the way only girls were supposed to hold books—pressed against the chest; boys were supposed to be able to grasp them with one hand and support them against their hip, or, even more masculine, carry them in a duffel bag slung over the shoulder).

"Did Mrs. Hasbrouck give you those lavender candies again?! Blyech!!" my mom would say, and comically stick out her tongue. "You two characters!"

Knowing she'd refuse but wanting to keep up the situation comedy, I would answer my mom back, "Do you want one?"

"Oh, honey, you know I can't stand those things! I tried one once and had to throw it out," and she would put her hand over her mouth, and I'd laugh. "They're so perfumey. I don't know what they put in those things. I think she buys them at a perfume counter in Wanamakers." And we would keep on laughing.

"I like them," I'd insist.

"Well they're all yours, then!"

One time I drove everybody in the house crazy with a pair of castanets that Mrs. Hasbrouck lent me. I couldn't get the hang of them, and no one in my family could believe that I actually tried to use them or, for that matter, that a pair of castanets had actually found its way into our house. Castanets represented a culture that was so foreign to us as to seem unreal—the kind of ridiculous thing you only saw on The Lawrence Welk Show or in a Bugs Bunny cartoon, with Bugs dressed in drag like Carmen Miranda, pretending to be a sexy Spanish dancing girl, luring Elmer Fudd into some kind of humiliating trap (Fudd, perhaps, would try to kiss "her" and end up with a black eye or a rubber plunger stuck to his mouth instead of Bugs' thick, lipstick-red lips). Castanets could only have connoted slapstick and degradation in my family. I think my mother insisted that I immediately return them to Mrs. Hasbrouck the next week, "and be sure to tell her thank you, but we've had our experiment, and enough's enough!" Sometimes, my mother must have thought, Mrs. Hasbrouck could go too far—in the same way that,
in *The Sound of Music*, Captain von Trapp was appalled to discover, on his return from Vienna, that while he was gone Maria made play clothes for the children out of the curtains that used to hang in her bedroom, and she led them singing and dancing, in broad daylight for all the world to see, through the streets of Salzburg.

But though they didn't share the same appetite for cultural exotica, my mom and Mrs. Hasbrouck did have one big thing in common: they were smoking buddies. One of the things they loved to joke about was how there seemed to be fewer and fewer "real smokers" left in the world. They never asked people, "Do you mind if I smoke?" if they went out to dinner or visited somebody's house, for fear that the person might say "Yes, I do mind, thank you for asking." They would double over with laughter when telling stories about some smug nonsmoker who spoiled their fun for an evening by asking them not to smoke. Now and then they would talk about how they know they ought to cut down or quit, and they would commiserate about how joyless life became when they tried. One of the funniest things my mom thought Mrs. Hasbrouck ever said to her was when they were comparing notes about trying out the various newfangled low-tar cigarettes, and Mrs. Hasbrouck said, "they taste like they just went out!" My mom loved Mrs. Hasbrouck for that: "Ann, I know I can always count on you! When we're both in our nineties and still puffing away and everyone else is dead and gone, I'm coming over to your house!" Mom would shout with laughter, and they would hug and kiss each other so long: "I'll see you next week, sweetie."

"OK, Peggy." Then to me, "Now Patrick, you watch out for her. Don't let her get into trouble!"

Little by little, Mrs. Hasbrouck gave away a good deal of her piano music to me over the years, including her precious, deteriorating copy of Bach's "Jesu, joy of man's desiring" for two pianos (which both Suzanne and Mary Jo, as well as I, had the honor of performing at piano recitals with Mrs. Hasbrouck); the two-piano Mozart Piano Concerto no. 21, which, incredibly, Mrs. Hasbrouck thought I might just feel like picking up one day and having some fun with; and a book of Chopin études, "sure to keep you up nights for the rest of your life," Mrs. Hasbrouck assured me. She began to develop arthritis in her hands not long after I started taking lessons from her in 1968; by the late seventies she could no longer stretch a full octave, and her hands would be in pain after playing for even just a few minutes. So the music she passed on to me was material that she herself could no longer handle physically, much as she adored it. She was entrusting it to me for safekeeping.
Then, she claimed, as the seventies wore on and she started teaching the children of some of her former pupils and even her own rambunctious grandchildren, young people were becoming increasingly unfit to learn the piano. They were too impatient, too overstimulated by other things like TV and minor league this and that. To be frank, children weren’t nice anymore; they were rude, demanding, didn’t say “thank you” or “please” for anything. Mrs. Hasbrouck thought the younger parents of today were to blame—they only wanted their children to learn to play the piano because it would impress the neighbors or because it would help them get into posh boarding schools. Parents enjoyed buying big, expensive pianos as furniture, but they couldn’t tell a good piano from a bad one. In short, they sent their children to piano lessons for all the wrong reasons.

“Not like your parents. They are such lovely people,” she would say. “And they’re so proud of you. They must love to hear you play.” This was a touchy subject. I didn’t believe it. I wasn’t convinced my parents thought I played well—or rather, their praise often meant little to me because it didn’t seem to have any solid basis in anything other than the fact that I was their son and they loved me. (What did they know about music or about playing the piano? My mother played when she was a girl, but her teacher used to bang her fingers against the keyboard, so she gave it up as soon as she could. Whenever she would describe her piano lessons to me, the feeling of pain she experienced would come back on her face, as if just thinking about it had the power to make her fingers ache all over again.) I’d make my way through the pieces I was practicing, then I’d go out into the kitchen to see my mother. I’d go to her, hoping for praise or applause, knowing that I didn’t deserve it, and invariably she would say something like, “that was beautiful, Patrick. You play so wonderfully! What was that piece?”

Immediately I would feel frustrated. “Well, which one do you mean? I was playing several different ones.”

“Oh, they’re all beautiful. What was that last one you played?”

At this point, I wondered, did she even hear anything I was playing?

At the annual recital one year, I played Chopin’s Nocturne op. 9, no. 2—the first piece of “difficult” piano music I ever learned. Afterward, Mrs. Hasbrouck was talking to me and my parents. She was saying how one of her other students, an older boy named Stuart, whom we all thought was destined to become a professional musician, had criticized my rendition of the Chopin nocturne. “Stuart came up to me afterward and said, ‘Patrick played that nocturne too slowly. It’s supposed to be a nighttime piece, but there has to be more momentum.’ Well, I told him,
‘Stuart, that may be how you would play it, and that may even be how the piece was written, but you have no right to tell Patrick how to play it. He has his own interpretation, which is different from yours.’"

“Oh, I’m sure Stuart didn’t mean to be critical,” my mom said immediately, unaccountably rushing to defend a boy she didn’t know instead of her son, and making me think that there was a difference between what my parents told me in private and what they said about me in public (the weird thing was that whereas I could imagine most other parents bragging about their kids in public and then ignoring them or putting them down in private, here it seemed to be just the reverse).

But this was a powerful statement coming from Mrs. Hasbrouck. I didn’t realize that what I was doing was “interpreting” the piece. I was playing it the way I thought it was supposed to be played, or at least the way I liked hearing it given the limits of what I could do at the piano. First, I was shocked to hear that Mrs. Hasbrouck agreed with Stuart that I hadn’t played it correctly; but then I was thrilled to learn that she thought so much of me and my “incorrect interpretation” that, as far as she was concerned, I could play Chopin as I pleased. (Years later in graduate school, I felt similarly when the administrator of the English department told me that one of my professors “really admires your work—she doesn’t agree with you, but she loves what you’re doing.” Doesn’t agree with me?, I thought, how come I don’t know anything about this?! On the other hand, what a thrill to hear it confirmed from someone else that she likes my work!)

But then the shadow of a doubt: What was the standard against which Mrs. Hasbrouck judged my work, if it wasn’t what, of all people, Chopin intended? What did Mrs. Hasbrouck’s approval of my work say about Mrs. Hasbrouck herself? Did she know what she was talking about? To some extent I always disbelieved Mrs. Hasbrouck’s praise of me. I’d heard with my own ears other of her students playing (especially Stuart), and I figured there were things they could play that I would never be able to play. I felt her love for me blinded her to my inadequacies.

It was around this time, I think, that Mrs. Hasbrouck started crying when I played the piano at recitals. One year I played several Broadway show tunes, including “A Lovely Night” and “Ten Minutes Ago” from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Cinderella, and as a finale, Richard Rodgers’s “The Sweetest Sounds” from No Strings. Mrs. Hasbrouck told me after the recital that by the time I finished playing, she had tears in her eyes. (And I hadn’t forgotten, when she told me this, that she really wasn’t fond of show tunes to begin with.)

So, though I loved getting Mrs. Hasbrouck’s praise, somehow it seemed off the mark, and the delight that my parents were, according
to Mrs. Hasbrouck, supposedly taking in my music seemed slightly less than self-evident. I would never lie outright to Mrs. Hasbrouck by agreeing with her that, yes, I too thought my parents loved the way I played. But I could never bring myself to really talk with her about it either. Instead, I would say something ambiguous like, "oh, yeah, I'm sure they do," and then change the subject pretty quickly. I didn't know how to broach this subject with Mrs. Hasbrouck—just as, years later, I never quite knew how to come out to her (she must have known anyway). I think I've always wanted to keep my relationship with Mrs. Hasbrouck as a refuge from the intractible realities of the rest of the world; I wanted the time and space we shared to stay pure, abstract, and musical. But was our relationship ever so ideal?

The first half of The Sound of Music ends as Maria leaves the von Trapp family villa while the party in honor of Baroness Schraeder merrily goes on in the ballroom. Maria realizes she is in love with the captain, and she feels his desire for her in return; so to avoid the possibility of their mutual attraction developing any further, she decides to leave. To the sound of a rousing rendition of "Edelweis" played by the ballroom orchestra (making her departure all the more heartbreaking—the happy, up-tempo music knows nothing of the painful action it underscores), Maria rushes down the grand staircase, leaves a white envelope on a side table beneath a large, gilt mirror, makes her way to the front door, and, before turning to exit, takes one last, regretful look at the grand entrance foyer—the place where she first met the children, where she first laid eyes on the captain, and where the captain thanked her for bringing music back into the house—music he'd forgotten. When, during the second half of the film, she returns, hoping, as the Reverend Mother has encouraged her, to face her problems, to "find out how God wants you to spend your love," and "to live the life you were born to live," the Captain greets her with a flirtatious air of wounded relief that she has come back:

CAPTAIN: You left without saying good-bye. Even to the children.
MARIA: Well it was wrong of me. Forgive me.
CAPTAIN: Why did you?
MARIA: Please don't ask me.

When Mrs. Hasbrouck died in the winter of 1994, I didn't go to her funeral. Although I continued to visit her regularly for years after I moved away from home, by the early nineties I'd virtually stopped playing the piano and my visits with Mrs. Hasbrouck had come down to one a
year at most. Our lives had changed: Mrs. Hasbrouck’s husband died in 1990, she retired from teaching in 1992, and, increasingly incapacitated by Parkinson’s disease, she entered a nursing home near Philadelphia not long after that. I came out as a gay man in the mid-eighties, entered graduate school, struggled to redefine my relationship to nearly everyone I had ever known up until that time, and became more and more alienated from my immediate family. Around the time of her retirement, Mrs. Hasbrouck wrote me this letter not long after we’d spoken briefly on the telephone:

Dear Patrick,

It was so wonderful to hear from you. I miss seeing you very much but I realize that you must have very little time for writing letters or visiting. I had a very pleasant talk with your mother several weeks ago. She had called me because Suzie wanted to buy a piano and needed some advice. It gave me a chance to hear about what is happening in your life.

Poor Patrick! You must be having a terrible time reading my handwriting. It’s getting worse all the time. In the first place the Parkinson’s disease is getting worse with age and then my eyesight is nearly gone which was the reason made [sic] music almost impossible.

[...] On the way up [to Vermont the previous week with her son Allan] we stopped at West Point to visit my brother’s grave. He died a few weeks ago and I’m finding it difficult to accept. I have only one brother left.

[...] Patrick dear, I apologize for this writing but I do miss you and want to send you my

Love,

Ann H.

When Maria comes back, the children are the first to see her. They’re trying to cheer themselves up by singing one of the songs Maria taught them, “My Favorite Things,” but their song is forlorn and funereal until Brigitta (the one, as Maria had reminded the captain, who “notices everything”) hears Maria’s voice, faint, in the distance, picking up the tune: “snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes.” They see her coming through the trees across the lawn, her carpetbag and guitar in hand. Maria! Maria! they cry. They race toward her with open arms, and she receives them all in her embrace. Gretl holds up a bandaged index finger for Maria’s inspection:

Maria: Gretl, what happened to your finger?

Gretl: It got caught.
Poor Gretl! Poor von Trapp children! The love Maria felt for them was pure and uncomplicated, and once she had taught them to sing, she had forever unblocked their ability to love her in return. And when Maria left them, they felt nothing but the purest sadness.

But when I read “Poor Patrick!” in Mrs. Hasbrouck’s letter to me, I thought, she must be kidding! I’m not the one who’s suffering, she is. When I read how Mrs. Hasbrouck missed me and was struggling to get my attention (“I miss seeing you very much. . . . I do miss you”), I thought, How could she love me so much? She hardly even knows me anymore. What have I done to deserve her love?

A few weeks before Mrs. Hasbrouck’s death, my Grandmother Horrigan died. She and I had enjoyed a special friendship during her last years, and, like Mrs. Hasbrouck, my grandmother seemed to understand something about me that no one else in my family understood, or if they did, they couldn’t acknowledge it in the same way that she could. In the eulogy I delivered at my grandmother’s funeral, I tried to talk about the kind of relationship we had:

Last year Nana seemed to be going through a phase where it felt necessary to her to start giving things away to people—certain special objects she set aside for specific people.

Her gift to me was a piece of crystal in the shape of a small tree bending gracefully but irrevocably sideways, as if in a strong wind, or in a hurricane, its glass branches curling, fluttering like ribbons made out of silk. Instantly I remembered a conversation I had with Nana when I was around ten. We were by ourselves, and she said to me, “you know, Pat, you’re a loner. I think you like to be alone.”

Now I don’t remember the context in which she said this, but she was right—I did spend a lot of my time alone, and I felt guilty about it. I wanted instead what I thought everyone else in my family had, which seemed to be lots of friends and lots of activity and no sadness or hurt feelings and no burdensome interior life of any consequence—so I thought.

“No, I’m not a loner,” I said defensively, feeling criticized and not wanting to share with her what I dimly felt was something important about myself, even though, just possibly, she might understand and accept it no matter what anyone else thought.

Then when Mrs. Hasbrouck died a few weeks later, I didn’t want to share my feelings about her death with anyone else, though I couldn’t say why. I wanted to keep her death, and the memories of my life with
her, to myself. The weekend of Mrs. Hasbrouck's funeral I was scheduled to give a talk in Kentucky at a conference on twentieth-century literature. I canceled my talk, but not so that I could attend Mrs. Hasbrouck's funeral. Instead, I stayed at home in New York, alone.

Recently, I wanted to play the piano for my boyfriend, Rob, even though I hadn't played in at least seven years. He came over to my apartment one day and brought along his friend Vivian, a piano teacher, who was visiting from Los Angeles. After I struggled but made it through the Brahms Intermezzo op. 118, no. 2—a piece I used to know by heart and was particularly fond of playing for Mrs. Hasbrouck (partly, I think, because for years I thought it was simply the most beautiful melody I'd ever heard, and it was a piece I could play well)—Vivian talked about how painful it is, even for her, to play the piano; how it can sometimes seem like a contest between you and the instrument; how important it is not to give up in the middle of a piece but to keep going and get to the end; how hard it is not to let mistakes, imperfections, even lack of talent deter you from staying with the music. A few days later, Rob told me how, soon after Vivian had returned to L.A., she played, imperfectly, one of Bach's Two-Part Inventions for him over the phone and then spent the rest of the day in wrenching pain because she hadn't managed to play for him as well as she had wanted. "It's Okay," he told her, "I loved what you played. I couldn't hear the mistakes. Now I want to get a recording of Bach's piano music because what you played really inspired me to want to learn more." But she was hard to console. Rob did buy a CD of Bach's piano music, and lately he's been listening to it as he paints—it's completely changed his mental state while he makes art, he says, and he's grateful to me and to Vivian, despite all our complaints about our musical faults, for opening up this new world to him.

Near the end of The Sound of Music, Maria, the captain, and the children take refuge from the Nazis in the abbey where Maria had been a postulant. The Reverend Mother ushers the family into the churchyard and behind a row of tombstones where they won't be seen. Before leaving them there, she says good-bye to Maria, whom she realizes she may never see again:

REVEREND MOTHER: You will not be alone. Remember, "I will lift mine eyes into the hills from whence cometh my help."

MARIA: Yes, Mother.

[They give each other one long, last embrace.]
In the final scene of the film, the von Trapp family cross a wind-swept mountain to a new and uncertain life.

*The Sound of Music* means more to me now than it did when I was a child: now it whispers through hollowed hands of the urge for leaving and the difficulty of saying good-bye. But it also looks forward, one day, every day, to the possibility of return.