Chapter 6
Golden Gates
1953–1956

On board the Benjamin Harrison en route back to the States, the troopship’s radio reported on March 5, 1953 that Stalin had died. That meant the war in Korea we had left behind would soon be over. Stalin had pulled the strings. Although the combatants would now have to settle basically on the lines at which the war began, perhaps something less than that for the North, it would take more than a year of frustrating negotiations to conclude a formal cease-fire and exchange of prisoners who opted for repatriation. No peace treaty would follow.

San Francisco emerged out of the lifting fog at 7:30 on the morning of March 18. Returning under the sunlit Golden Gate was the most emotional experience of my young life. I was hardly alone in that feeling. I thought the transport might founder at the bow as homecoming troops crowded forward to receive the blessing of the bridge.

A Marine band at the dock struck up There Will be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight. It would not be quite that. We had to retrieve our belongings, go through bureaucratic re-entry paperwork, queue up to telegraph or telephone family, find a barracks bed overnight, and arrange to travel home. Few wanted to linger for a hot time in the old town.

At the airport in Philadelphia my brother was waiting to grab my duffel bag and escort me to his parking space. Automatically I rushed to the driver’s side of the car. I hadn’t been behind a wheel in nearly two years. “You can’t get in on that side,” Herb said. The door was smashed in. Since a crash months earlier, about which I knew nothing, my Olds coupe could only be entered from the passenger side. The
guilty party, who had run a red light, had no insurance and Herb had no money.

At Fort Dix, New Jersey, where I was relieved from active duty a few days later, a finance officer peeled off a formidable wad of fifty-dollar bills, which included payment for unused leave time that I could not take while in a combat zone. Pulled aside, I had been offered a surprising deal which allegedly I could not refuse. As I had apparently proven myself in unusual circumstances as a hospital administrator, would I be interested in remaining on active duty to become credentialed as one? I would be promoted to captain and assigned to Baylor University Medical School, where I would earn a graduate degree in medical administration. In repayment, I would have to remain on active duty for an equivalent number of years as work on the degree entailed. I would then have, I was assured, a rewarding career ahead, in or out of the military. To be out of uniform I declined what was indeed a promising opportunity. Perhaps it was an impulsive error. In war or peace, we live on the cusp of uncertainty.

A few days later, with Herb driving my wreck, I visited an auto agency in Philadelphia and purchased a new Ford sedan with four working doors. The salesman offered me fifty dollars trade-in for the battered one-door Olds; then, to his surprise I began paying out the balance in real money. “Don’t you want to test-drive it?” he asked. “No,” I said.

Although my teaching assistantship at Penn State, seven hours distant from home then, didn’t begin until early September, I was eager to see the university to which I had applied from Korea. Stopped there by a young campus cop for exceeding the 15 mph speed limit, I forgot that I was no longer an officer in a war zone. Rolling down my window I barked at his rather mild warning: “Blow it out your goddamn ass!” He nearly collapsed in shock, and I drove on.

After I met future colleagues and learned the details about my lowly status and stipend, I couldn’t locate my car to return home. When it came into view I didn’t yet recognize it—but the keys fit.

The new Ford made it possible for me to take on a minimal-pay summer job with my brother as boss. Herb and a partner had opened a summer day camp and needed drivers to pick up and return kids (two loads out and return), and to perform light counselor duties in-between. Experience not required. “Uncle Stanley,” said a tyke behind
me on my first trip out, “I feel sick.” He proceeded to vomit over my shoulder and down my Camp Green Lane T-shirt. Herb had more shirts with the Green Lane logo, and life got better after that. I had passed through a new infiltration course.

By then Herb had also arranged an introduction to a Temple University classmate confessedly too formidable for him but presumably right for me. He had shown Rodelle Horwitz my photo—a copy of the crew-cut headshot I had mailed to Penn State from Korea with my application. Rodelle, he predicted, would be the irresistible force confronting the immovable object. She may have said something like “Forget it!” to him, but in early May, she took up my invitation by telephone to see Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman* at Hedgerow Theatre in the Philadelphia suburbs. I had never seen a Shaw play. With a former boyfriend the year before, she had seen Shaw’s “Don Juan in Hell” dream scene drawn from it.

Rodelle was beautiful, but apparently a bit difficult. While I worried about making curtain time, she insisted on stopping several times to pick roadside flowers. We made it, but barely. At the intermission several young women she knew at college rushed over with “Professor Weintraub! You’re back!” Now in their senior year, they had been my first-year students. One was the girl who had submitted my own term paper to me. (I don’t recall how I coped with that reunion.) It was a long play and a late homecoming—and Rodelle accidentally (so she insists) left her unneeded umbrella in the car.

Herb offered to return the umbrella but I did so myself. I had not expected to see her again. I had become close to another girl, a counselor at Herb’s camp, and after several dates Edith and I arranged to meet at Robin Hood Dell, the outdoor musical arena in Fairmount Park. Young Leonard Bernstein was conducting and would be leading a Beethoven concerto from the piano. As I walked along the grassy bank in the Dell looking without success for Edith, I came upon Rodelle with a girlfriend. On their invitation, since I seemed alone, I joined them on the blanket they had spread. Soon Edie, arriving late, discovered us, as I found out the next day, my head on Rodelle’s lap. Edie had slipped silently away, and by the end of the summer Rodelle and I were a pair.

Somewhere we had heard—perhaps on the car radio—the Gershwins’ ballad from 1938, “Our Love Is Here to Stay,” and I remarked
that it had to become “our” song. “No it can’t be,” she said firmly. Her last boyfriend had called it their song. “He’s gone and I’m here,” I said. “It belongs to us now.” It closed with

Together we’re
Going a long, long way.
In time the Rockies may crumble,
Gibraltar may tumble
(They’re only made of clay.)
But our love is here to stay.

From Penn State that autumn I would write fulsomely to Rodelle: “What you’ve come to mean to me in the few short months we’ve been together is something ineffable. And I had always thought that my brother was good for nothing!”

Our relationship had not yet jelled when I returned to my Friday evening pre-Korea pinochle group. (Overseas I had played pinochle only once—at the Nikkatsu Hotel in Tokyo with Eddie Fisher and his G.I. entertainment crew. When I had encountered him in Korea, he had suggested getting together in Japan if I could wheedle a way there while he was there. An opportunity had arisen. As an officer, I had found no difficulty in accessing Private Fisher’s V.I.P. suite.)

Sharing pinochle table gossip back home, one buddy told us that his elder sister, who had been refusing the proposals of a suitor she felt beneath her aspirations—he drove a truck for Esslinger’s Beer—on turning thirty had just accepted him. (Jack himself would never marry.) Another player—he had sported the wartime zoot suit—had enlisted after high school and thrived through the soft Japanese occupation, trading packs of PX cigarettes for easily available sex. Back home now in a more Spartan life, he was in college on the G.I. Bill. Still another, then in his family’s business, was spending freely on girls, and would eventually marry four times. (At a school reunion decades later I would meet only the fourth spouse.)

That led me, perhaps prematurely, to mention Rodelle, whose name hadn’t come up before. “This is serious stuff,” I confided. It soon seemed that way at home. I returned so late some summer nights—more like early morning—that my father asked me at one breakfast, before I vanished again: “Are you engaged?” I repeated the query to
Rodelle. It wasn’t a proposal out of popular romances, but the upshot was that before I left for Penn State, we were paired.

Dad was obviously failing, but between lapses into sleep he wanted to meet Rodelle. From mail received in Korea I had known he was far from well. Occasional letters would arrive overseas from Herb and Cookie, largely cautious about conditions at home. Mom would write regularly, usually responding to my wary letters about what I was doing, and occasionally she would include an unfinished, trailing-off, fragment from Dad. I had shared books with him when I was a kid, and he tried to tell me about his reading. He could no longer complete a letter, his words faltering in mid-sentence as he dozed off, but I received each of them from Mom as they were. Understanding their implications, I had wept.

Now, in the room with the TV that had been my anniversary gift from Korea the year before, my parents awaited Rodelle. Mom had prepared dinner, and I brought Rodelle to meet them. Unfortunately, my favorite fish recipe, as it simmered, soon became too strong in aroma for her, and Rodelle excused herself to lie down in a bedroom upstairs. Awkwardly, we began to dine without her. When she recovered and joined us, Dad, apparently impressed by her “Princess and the Pea” sensitivity as well as her charm, said to me quietly: “She’s too good for you.” He meant it, I believe, to emphasize my good fortune. My mother never again risked serving Rodelle baked mackerel.

Back in Happy Valley, I wrote to Rodelle daily, whether or not I had anything to say. I quoted Lord Byron to her: “A letter is … the only device for combining solitude and good company.” I was doing so much reading, catching up on such deprivation during my Korean time, that I copied memorable lines into notebooks and foisted some of the results on her. She could look forward, I forecast, quoting James Jones in From Here to Eternity, to “the age-old conversation where the man explains his ideals and his hopes for life and the woman listens and agrees and tells him how wonderful he is.” (She would prove far too tough-minded for that.) I sent her ruddy, frostbitten autumn leaves, as fall in the Centre County hills came weeks earlier than in Philadelphia. “Life is empty here without you,” I wrote to her in mid-October. “I can lose myself in my work for just SO long—and then my thoughts return to you.” On the seventh page of a later letter, Rodelle wrote: “I don’t
want to leave you, not even by ending a letter.” Another contained a large swirl of her brown hair. Her ponytail was giving way to the next phase of her life.

It was a long and weary seven-hour drive, then, to Philadelphia, but I was back often as we planned our future together. On one weekend I brought with me my Bronze Star medal, which had just arrived with unsurprising army delays in ordinary mail. On the back my name was inscribed. Crumpled up with it was a formal citation, dated May 9—for “meritorious achievement in ground operations against the enemy.” I smoothed it out to put it into a five-and-ten frame.

Before I left Penn State on a Friday in early November for our engagement party at Rodelle’s home, I got an anxious call from her. “It’s snowing hard here,” she warned. “Maybe we should call the party off.” I explained that the sun was shining in Centre County, and east-to-west storms were rare. Just in case, I would borrow tire chains from Bill Betts, a colleague who wasn’t going anywhere. Besides, I wanted to formally present my engagement ring. I had given some of my Army payout to my father to take Rodelle to Philadelphia’s jewelry row on Sansom Street to choose a ring. I had yet to see it. Bill Betts gave me a burlap bag labeled “onions” with a set of snow chains.

Halfway home, in blizzard conditions which materialized when approaching Harrisburg, I resorted to the tire chains, and lost one as it broke and disappeared in the snow in hilly Germantown, just before arriving in Philadelphia. Travel took eleven hours of hairy driving. While the party was going on the next evening, the phone rang. A caller named Lou was asking to date Rodelle. Somehow, he had learned her number. Lou, it turned out, was a high school classmate of mine with whom I had long lost touch. Without alluding to me, over the celebratory hubbub Rodelle explained that she was unavailable and likely to remain that way.
At a Pep Boys auto parts shop the next morning I bought new chains for Bill—and also for me, in case I would need them. “Hey! These aren’t mine,” he protested when I brought him the shiny new set. “They are now,” I said.

English at Penn State then comprised two independent departments—Composition and Literature. With sixteen full-time faculty, Literature was much the smaller. There I held one of the four annual teaching assistantships offering (pre-inflation) one thousand dollars a year. Only the G.I. Bill stipend made the appointment remotely feasible. Aspirants in Literature were resented by the populous Composition faculty who—even full professors—taught five writing courses a semester, usually to first-year students, and had to grade reams of mediocre papers. Most unpopular—with one exception—was “Comp Zero,” a no-credit course for the relatively illiterate. John Barth, a new assistant professor, preferred a complete schedule of “Zero,” as that meant no preparation and more time for novel writing, at which he would become a conspicuous success. His wife graded his fill-in-the-blank grammar exercises.

As senior writing faculty protested the literature plums, we grad assistants in Lit were interviewed by the Comp chair to assess our fitness to be dragooned into at least a token composition course. My turn to be evaluated to teach freshmen had come quickly in the first week of residence. I was asked about my relevant experience. I confessed that because of Army service I hadn’t taught anything for two years, and that even when I taught English to freshmen at Temple I had been unprepared, as I had expected to do graduate work in history. I could not teach grammar adequately, never took such a course, and did not know how to diagram a sentence. “I can’t use you,” Ted Gates admonished. “Go back to Literature, where you belong.” Happily, I did.

Peeved at my rejection, a Comp stalwart, bulking up his broad shoulders, observed of my lowly status and lieutenant’s commission that he had risen to major in the big war, and on return, in compensation for his service, he had been promoted to full professor. Yet he was stuck with basic writing while I taught literature. I commiserated that I had been rejected as unqualified. Earlier, his grandiosity had impressed Joe Heller, now gone into advertising copy writing in New York. Heller had been an instructor ineligible for assistant professor rank, despite his
publishing fiction in *Esquire*, because he had no Ph.D. He had already begun *Catch-19*, soon to be retitled *Catch-22*, in which he scornfully turned Professor John Major into “Major Major.”

Unlike Professor Major, who published nothing I ever heard of, other faculty were concocting textbooks which became compulsory for students, and enhanced their meager salaries. A freshman text produced by the current Composition chair, Ted Gates, and his late predecessor, had been required for decades and was still in marginally remunerative use although long obsolete. Students derided it as “Pearly Gates.” On the second-hand market, students could unload it at best for twenty-five cents. A required second-semester writing text, because of the surnames of its co-authors, was punningly referred to as “Old Gravy.” Three youngish professors in Literature soon put together a required textbook with quizzes in the back, which in pre-photocopy days had to be torn out on the dotted lines and submitted, making the book impossible to be re-sold, even for a quarter. It was still too new then to have earned a derisory epithet.

An entertaining but non-publishing professor taught a popular Shakespeare course that required only listening, as he taught the Bard by emoting key lines while standing atop his desk. Surprised to see him in the Reference Room of the library pawing through a large tome, I asked what he was researching. “My stock portfolio,” Tom Bowman said. One grad assistant joined the church choir of his Chaucer professor to wheedle a good grade. Another professor tried to dissuade me from taking his undergraduate American Drama course (even for no credit). It was an area about which I knew little. Joe Rubin explained that it was useful for football players to earn three credits and that he mostly played records of musicals. I signed up for the course anyway, and listened to discs of *Guys and Dolls* and *Pal Joey*. On the other hand, a nerdy Comp teacher with a publishing record that elevated him to teach a Lit seminar on James Joyce warned students that they wouldn’t be reading as much as a whole book. Mitch Morse spent that semester on the first twenty pages of *Finnegans Wake*.

As the Joyce course suggested, times were changing. A few years later, by college decree, Literature was merged into Composition in a modernization and sweeping-out effort, and new hires were scholars quickly recognizable in print although scorned by the Old Guard. One,
an exciting assistant professor adored by his students, with a landmark new book published by Princeton University Press, would be denied tenure. He wore jeans and a flannel shirt to class, and was known in the classroom to describe poor work as “shit.” At home he brewed beer (as he couldn’t afford to buy it) in an old washing machine. Barney was the wrong sort—but the future.

The university president as I arrived, younger brother to the general in the White House, was making noises about academic change, but the crucial one, in 1956, would be to change his own job, moving to Johns Hopkins. Penn State’s name, in tandem with Michigan State, had already been elevated to University in 1953, the year I arrived. Progress to justify the upgrade was slow, but it would be more than nominal. Eric Walker, the successor to Milton Eisenhower, and former Engineering Dean, was unknown to the press but determined to expunge the farm school image. In the 1960s, federal dollars began stimulating a dynamism that impacted library resources, laboratories and professorial appointments. That quickened later when Lyndon Johnson occupied the Oval Office. Penn State would ride the wave.

When winter receded and our plans for a wedding early in June 1954 were settled, another rite of passage occurred. In January Rodelle had earned her Education degree from Temple. As she knew she was leaving Philadelphia, she opted to do substitute teaching rather than seek a position she would have to resign. Every other weekend I would make the long round trip from Penn State to be with her, leaving again early on Monday morning. Before returning, I would stop at 2122 Spring Garden Street to pick her up and drive her to a school assignment. (Low on the scheduling totem pole, I was assigned Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday morning classes, leaving Mondays open. Quickly, I became a hero to my students when I announced that on home football Saturdays, classes would be canceled.)

Two hurdles to marriage remained. Her father, another Ben, had lived for decades with a form of agoraphobia that limited his travel to distances no farther than a few miles from his house. A novelty cap manufacturer with a small factory loft nearby, he could drive as far as Shibe Park, about two miles, to deliver novelty Phillies baseball caps for sale. Yet he had never ranged as far as the relatively nearby synagogue Rodelle had chosen for the wedding. Every Sunday he would get
behind the wheel of his tan, chrome-free Kaiser, a postwar brand with the shelf life of the Edsel, and risk a drive with Rodelle up Broad Street. When he reached what was for him an alarming distance, he U-turned abruptly and headed home. Eventually he got as far as the synagogue, and no farther. Rodelle wrote to me about the bleak “plight” of both our mothers: “But what can we do? Darling—each night I pray that we aren’t doomed to the same fates as our parents. Sometimes I’d like to stop time so that there would be no future.”

Late that February (1954) I received a departmental notice that before I could formally proceed to the Ph.D. I would have to pass, according to Graduate School regulations, a three-hour candidacy exam scheduled for the next Saturday morning. The message, which arrived on Thursday, closed: “I recommend that you do not cram for it.” I wrote to Rodelle, quoting Henry V, that given the lead time offered, it would fly “in motion of no less celerity than that of thought.” I survived.

Another problem to solve was our finding a place in Happy Valley in which to live. Once I collected a short list of rentable apartments, which then were scarce, Rodelle arrived to survey the possibilities with me. The closest to campus was a cramped attic flat with low sloping ceilings. Another was so limited in amenities that the shower was a metal booth in the tiny kitchen, and the inadequate rooms were linked only by a shared hallway. The owner of the building was a Reverend Hess, a retired itinerant minister. When he asked for my credentials, I showed him my driver’s license and my Penn State ID. Noting my surname he said abruptly: “I won’t rent to you. You’re not American.” We exited in suppressed fury, yet also in relief at being spared that dismal alternative. Bellefonte, the (then) dim county seat nearby, where we chose not to live, was known, not uniquely, as we bordered on the Midwest, as a buckle on the Bible Belt.

For Rodelle’s overnight stay (I was renting a room in a private home), I had arranged to have her sleep over in a small clapboard farmhouse on Branch Road, on the outskirts of town, in which a grad student classmate, Marty, lived with his pre-hippy wife Alice and infant daughter. A balding World War II vet, he had a houseful of furniture from local auctions that was beneath second-hand in dilapidation, and a matching station wagon with rotting wooden sides. Rodelle was to use a sagging
sofa-bed in their excuse for a parlor. Unfortunately, an insistent occupant of the sofa was Pavlov, their undisciplined red setter, who would root for vermin in the cow pasture nearby, roll about in manure, then return to the pillows to sleep. Rodelle had a more than restless night in the reek, made worse by a thunderstorm during which lightning struck the house and ripped a gash in the parlor wall at the fireplace.

Early that morning we found an adequate apartment in town, one of six units in a building owned by a farmer, Delbert Myers, who noted that he only rented to “permanent people,” not students. Displaying my Penn State ID, I assured him untruthfully that I was permanent, not realizing how accurate that would be.

With two hundred miles between us, our letters as June approached became more passionate although not unprintable. “Ten weeks and four days,” Rodelle wrote—“or is it three? I think this is my first real ‘love letter’ to you and I couldn’t stop.”

We had succeeded through all predictable handicaps to our nuptials on June 6, 1954. Efficient from the start, Rodelle prudently arranged for a baby sitter at the synagogue, although no children had been invited. Still, one of my distant Weintraub cousins—never seen again—brought her brat, and refused to relinquish her to the sitter. We discovered that when a screaming fit erupted, Rodelle had the ceremony stopped until mother and child exited. At the close, the rabbi’s wife intervened to invite everyone present, beyond the wedding guests, to partake of food and drink in the community room below. Provisions would run out—but not before the delinquent toddler returned and spilled something colorful and ineradicable onto the bride’s gown. Rodelle later claimed to regret restraining her from chewing on the wedding bouquet, as some of the blossoms might have been poisonous.
After Rodelle changed into going-away clothes, we drove north into Bucks County to overnight en route to Lake Placid, New York. It was already late that Sunday, and the only eatery still open in New Hope served nearly inedible spaghetti. In the morning we drove on from our motel, only to be stopped for speeding in Morristown, New Jersey. I had failed to see a warning sign limiting vehicles to fifteen miles an hour as we passed a school training the blind to use seeing-eye dogs. As I weakly began my apologies to the state trooper he noticed the wedding gown on the back seat, and I explained. He urged caution and waved us on. Not long after, as a reaction to the low speed, I exceeded the modest new limits—thirty-five miles an hour—and was stopped again. The bridal gown worked once more, and without further delays we made it to Lake Placid while listening on the car radio to the dramatic Army–Senator Joe McCarthy hearings.

At the Hotel Marcy we found that we were the only outsiders at the state convention of the Disabled American Veterans. At dinner—I wore my Bronze Star lapel pin—I was asked about my disability. I confessed that I emerged from Korea unscathed. “That’s OK,” said an affable table companion, “we have lots of members with zero disability. We can fix that and you can join us.” I didn’t, but with rainy weather making the lake less than useful, and our inability to spend all of the days as well as the nights in bed, I joined the local library. For years that would provide Rodelle with a supply of jokes to friends. Yet a writer needs to read, and I would be doing a lot of writing when back on campus.

A summer in Philadelphia intervened. As I had no interim employment, Rodelle, a playground supervisor the previous summer and now back again, arranged for me to oversee a different playground. A job was a job. Each afternoon when I picked her up, the kids would greet me as “Mr. Rodelle.” We had rented a small furnished house for the summer, and, always a misfit in navigation, unfailingly I would wander off course. Returning to Penn State, we settled in on Hamilton Avenue. Denied an assistantship in early childhood education because she might become pregnant, and with no temporary teaching jobs available, Rodelle became the low-paid secretary-assistant to the director of the Hillel Foundation. A job was a job. (At Hillel I again became “Mr. Rodelle.”)
After gritty, grey Philadelphia as she knew it, Rodelle found the college town idyllic. She wrote to her mother:

I just got back from a long walk through the town. I had an errand to do for Hillel and also wanted to retrieve something from home. The town is so beautiful, I would like to live here forever. It is more beautiful than the suburb of a city, but it is too far from everything. That is its main disadvantage. Every house has a huge lawn, much bigger than city lawns, and they are well cared for. More lovely than the fronts of houses are their backs. Many times I just had to stop and look. Apple, peach, pear and cherry trees are everywhere, and are so loaded with fruit that they seem bowed. Many of the leaves have already started changing color.

Flowers of all sorts are still blooming.... In the front of my apartment house there are two huge beds of pansies. Roses are everywhere. There are aster and mums and nasturtiums and many flowers I’ve never seen before. The people seem as friendly as the town is pretty. Yesterday Stan went out to pick apples from the tree on our back lawn. He only picked the ones he could reach easily and I had enough to bake a pie and make 1½ quarts of applesauce. While he was out, one of our neighbors I hadn’t seen yet gave him 3 huge tomatoes that must weigh nearly 1 pound each and a bouquet of red and white flowers. She would have given him more flowers but because of my allergies he only wanted the ones that had no smell.

The beginning of each academic year was a time for getting-to-know-you parties, teaching assistants included. It was a far more hard-drinking ethos than since, especially in a town where no liquor store existed. Restaurants could legally serve only beer, and Bible Belt restrictions had even shuttered movie houses much of Sunday. A youngish professor and his wife invited us for drinks and dinner in their newly built house with seemingly miles of bookshelves. I discovered books with library stamps on the spines, and opened several to discover that they were years overdue. (By phone, faculty could renew books semester after semester.) “I’m storing them for the library,” Ralph Condee said.

Brice Harris, my department head, hosted a welcoming party with a huge bowl of champagne punch laced with vodka. At a later opening-year party at which a composition professor once a professional baseball pitcher presided,5 guests ladled out martinis from a punch bowl. I had learned about do-it-yourself martinis with all sorts of substitute ingredients in Korea, where one often craved alcoholic release, but these were the real thing.

After Bob Weaver’s martinis some of us proceeded to the Tavern, a popular beer-only oasis with long plank tables patterned after Mory’s
at Yale. As the waiter, one of my former students, brought menus, overcome by alcoholic excess I slid quietly under the table. “Mr. Weintraub, Mr. Weintraub...!” he struggled. The others signaled him to ignore me and that they were ready to order. Later I was removed gently, colleagues lifting me under each arm in a pretense of my walking, and Rodelle drove home.

Late in October 1954 our phone rang at about three in the morning. It was Herb. Our father was dead, in cardiac arrest. He had been found, apparently sleeping, with a copy of *Othello* open on his chest. The doses of Dexadrine to keep him awake had finally overtaxed his heart. He was fifty-six.

The copy of Shakespeare was typical of him. Invalided, he devoted much of his waking hours to reading, and long had quoted favorite passages from Dickens (he had all the novels) or from the Bard, not to boast erudition but because they wrote so memorably. To concede assent to something he would often respond: “Barkis is willin’” from *David Copperfield*. When he was often asked about riskily carrying proceeds from his weekly insurance collections—mostly dimes and quarters—after dark in the seedy neighborhoods that were his “debit” route, he would quote from *Othello*: “Who steals my purse, steals trash; ’tis something, nothing.” Neurologist Oliver Sacks, in his compassionate *Awakenings* (1973), would later describe *encephalitis lethargica* cases like my father’s, their recovery and relapse, and the new chemistry of possible treatment. But that would come much too late to matter for Dad.

At dawn we began driving to Philadelphia. Herb had already arranged for the funeral to take place the next day. At the brief ceremony my eyes burned with tears that would not flow. I recalled *Death of a Salesman*, only five years earlier, before I had left home for army service, in which Willy Loman’s health is fading, as had his sales future, and his series of automobile accidents, and even of the dreams his sons have to turn their finances around in Florida. Somehow Arthur Miller had anticipated fragments of Dad’s decline in his drama.

The end of the doomed family grocery would soon come, and my mother and teenage sister (Herb, by then, was in Cincinnati) would move to a small rented house nearby. Mom would refresh her stenographic skills and return to what she had done before she married.
Her life, since, had been restricted as caregiver to her father, then her mother, then her husband. At fifty she was freed.

That winter the telephone again rang at about three. It was Marty, from his farmhouse. He had cautioned me when he knew of my coming marriage to be careful about an unwelcome pregnancy. It would be financially disastrous, as he already knew from the arrival of his infant daughter. What he didn’t know as he dispensed advice was that Alice was again pregnant. It was snowing like hell, Marty said. Alice was in agonizing labor. The hospital in Bellefonte was eleven miles away, and his old station wagon with its nearly bald tires couldn’t cope with the unplowed roads. While he remained with the baby, would I pick up Alice, chance driving on hilly, twisty Branch Road, and take her to the hospital? I threw clothes over my pajamas, attached tire chains, and, while Alice moaned all the way, drove her to Bellefonte. When I checked her in for delivery, the clerk in Admissions asked me to sign in advance for her likely expenses. I refused. I wasn’t the father, I insisted. “We hear that all the time,” I was told. I left Alice to cope with that and headed home.

The newborn was another girl. Decades later I was chair of a university press committee recommending books for publication approved by external critics. One was an art history study with a familiar byline. Its author was the infant whom I had brought in embryo in the snow to Bellefonte. She had a doctorate and was at a prestigious campus. She has no idea that I was involved in her birth, and in the birth of her book.

Through Marty in 1955 I learned that a little red schoolhouse on Branch Road just beyond the town, shuttered by the state and auctioned off—there were few bids—to a grad student, was again on the market. After several speeding tickets the owner had lost his driver’s license. It was much too far to walk to campus. He wanted $1,200 for the property. Other than electricity for a few light bulbs, it had no amenities—no plumbing, no heating. It looked like a wonderful toy, but was a potential sinkhole for rehabilitation. We had no savings but our wedding present funds, just enough for the purchase price. As temporary residents in Happy Valley, students could not borrow from local banks for home improvement. It made no sense anyway, as we would be leaving. We stayed on at Hamilton Avenue, where one afternoon
the entrance door to the apartment was left unlocked from the hallway while Rodelle was in the shower. Delbert Myers, our landlord, was checking thermostats to see why his fuel bill had gone up. As a farmer he was used to cold weather and cold-water showers; his tenants were not. Upon their surprise encounter, she screamed and he scurried away.

The months until the doctorate were a blur of reading, writing, one-finger typing, and job-seeking. Also, on occasion, cooking. While Rodelle was at work as Hillel Foundation secretary she would sometimes telephone home with instructions for preparing supper. My specialty was tuna casserole, with tuna then at thirty-five cents a can. Watching over the stove was a break from the typewriter. My dissertation subject had come, indirectly, out of Korea. Although surface mail took six weeks, I had asked Herb to send me some throwaway paperbacks. Among them were three George Bernard Shaw plays in Penguin editions. (My first date with Rodelle had been to see one of them onstage.) In one of my first courses at Penn State, on Victorian fiction, we were assigned by Professor Bruce Sutherland to explore the open stacks of the library to find a novel by a Victorian writer then unknown to us, and report on it. (Sutherland, who became my doctoral adviser, had produced a dissertation, later a book, on the little-remembered novels of Maurice Hewlett, a late-Victorian writer of historical romances.)

I found that Shaw had written five novels before he had turned with far greater success, in his mid-thirties, to playwriting. Rather than read one, I read them all, realizing as I did that even the GBS plays I already knew seemed to be foreshadowed in his fiction. I was hooked. I would explore the embryo playwright. Augmenting the resources of the Pattee Library at Penn State, I bought and borrowed books, visited other libraries, wrote letters to people who knew Shaw, such as David Garnett and Gilbert Murray, and perhaps naïvely placed an author’s query in the *New York Times Book Review*. Publication resulted in a flurry of crank letters—and also a postcard from a T.E. (“Ed”) Hanley from Hollywood, Florida. He was away for the winter, but I was welcome to visit him in Bradford, Pennsylvania. He claimed to have in his collections fifteen hundred Shaw letters, most of them unpublished. Bradford was only 110 miles from us. After the last snows we arranged to drive north to Bradford, on the edge of the New York border, and booked a hotel room in town.
Hanley’s home at 801 Main Street proved to be a large frame house with a two-level garage across the gravel driveway, its broad second floor housing most of his manuscripts. His art, Colonial to Modern, covered baseboard to ceiling, even behind chairs, in nearly every room of the house. He even possessed a striking work of ambulatory art, his sultry Egyptian wife. Tullah, once a belly-dancer, adorned herself with jewelry from Egyptian tombs to contemporary necklaces and bracelets. Hanley’s wealth had come from Pennsylvania oil and gas and a family brick works. Somehow Tullah, thirty-one in 1955, half Hanley’s age, claimed a connection to the American landscape painter George Inness, although she spelled “Inness” without the final “s”. His paintings hung all over the library, in the garage, even above the fireplace where the heat of a gas stove had caused the oil on a landscape to run. Tullah was also a friend of Henry Miller, and had been painted in the nude by Salvador Dalí—the striking canvas hung in the dining room—and she had Gilbert Stuart portraits in her bedroom. Ed Hanley slept on a pallet in the stark adjoining room.

Tullah’s chief literary interest was Shaw’s passion for Ibsenite actress Janet Achurch. (She had been Nora in the English premier of A Doll’s House.) The Hanleys had Shaw’s letters to Achurch and to her complaisant husband, Charles Charrington, which the Shaw Estate refused Tullah permission to publish. She would do so anyway, she insisted to us, by turning the letters into ostensibly fictional dialogue. And she did, however awkwardly, sending me a signed copy of The Strange Triangle of G.B.S. a year later, in 1956.

While her elderly English housekeeper, used to making tea, boiled coffee with its grounds in a saucepan, having no idea how to brew it, we began note-taking in the Hanleys’ collection of Shaw, now at the University of Texas along with their D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett, Dylan Thomas and other papers. Some of Shaw’s early job-seeking letters, and his pleas to potential publishers of his novels, would be quoted in my dissertation. I was also able to include an early playlet Shaw wrote for a friend during the fiction years as a French exercise. (I published it in both French and English in Esquire in 1959.) After Hanley’s death and the dispersal of their collections, Tullah would publish a graphic, illustrated memoir, Love of Art and Art of Love (1975), unsuitable for the open shelves of
most libraries. And she would belly-dance, on the least provocation, to the horror of staid art audiences, into her sixties.

Late in 1955 I began sending out letters seeking a faculty appointment. My department chair boasted of his connections and persuaded us to travel, at personal expense, to the Modern Language Association convention in Chicago that December, and to its thronged job mart. He would arrange introductions. Before we flew out, I received a letter from Shippensburg State College in Pennsylvania offering me an assistant professorship at $5,100, marginally less at the time than Penn State’s opening professorial salaries in humanities. “Don’t take it,” I was urged. “It’s a dead end. You can’t go anywhere from there.” I turned it down. In Chicago, after a bumpy flight in a thunderstorm, with lightning crackling around our Lockheed Constellation, I was offered exactly one interview, for the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks. I didn’t show up for it. Rodelle and I flew home in gloom.

Rodelle was pregnant and expecting in June, when I was to graduate. Soon we would have to give notice on our apartment lease. Evenings, taking turns, we both typed at my dissertation, “Bernard Shaw, Novelist”—six required copies, typed on onion skin paper with carbons between. Late in April a job offer arrived—an assistant professorship at Stephen F. Austin State College, in Nacogdoches, Texas, on the Louisiana border. Reply telegram paid. After looking at a map I turned it down. I hadn’t even applied for it. The college had been sent the wrong file: it wanted someone surnamed Weisert. John Weisert grabbed at the job—and, so I learned later, endured it for a year. While I opened letter after letter with negative responses, a friend of one of my professors, at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, found out about me and wired a job offer although I hadn’t applied. The same week as the telegram arrived, an article appeared in TIME that the state legislature in Massachusetts was attempting to politicize tenure in the state system by taking it into its own hands. That seemed bad news indeed, and to my regret I turned the offer down, for the proposal quickly failed and I was still unemployed.

We made plans to store our furniture, most of it not worth storing, after our lease expired, and for Rodelle to move to her parents’ house once the baby came. My grad student associates were getting jobs, perhaps not very attractive ones and in unattractive places, but all with
paychecks. Even Marty. Earlier, he had been turned down at a small college with Mennonite affiliations near Allentown, Pennsylvania. At his interview he was asked if he liked dancing. “Love it!” he enthused. “Then you’re not for us,” he was told, and shown the door.

Soon after, he was offered a one-year appointment which he quickly accepted. Marty asked me to help him and Alice move to Knoxville, Tennessee, by arranging that everything that could not go with them in their ancient station wagon and even more ancient wooden trailer would be picked up by a local auctioneer. I was to accept the post-auction check and mail it to Knoxville. The University of Tennessee had, happily for him, hired him—for a year—unseen. He spurned formal graduation, and cap-and-gown rental, and was eager to leave.

I helped with the loading. The trailer sagged frighteningly under its burdens. Alice and the two children were in the wagon with the bed-clothes and the remains of the pantry and kitchen. Some furniture was stowed on the roof and battened down. As I waved a farewell and Marty gingerly backed out into Branch Road, the trailer collapsed, strewing the road with books not worth taking, tawdry rugs which had already seen previous auctions, expensive wedding presents which Alice had refused to use because they were too bourgeois, and other impedimenta. The trailer had to be abandoned and most of its contents left for the auctioneer.

Two weeks later auctioneer Johnnie Gray telephoned, and I drove out to collect Marty’s check. At the auction, Gray had been able to sell everything, often for a pittance, but for the complete works of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, in thirty handsome Buckram volumes. He had them in two, heaping bushel baskets. The only Bulwer-Lytton novel I knew was The Last Days of Pompeii, an early nineteenth-century best-seller. “Would you like to buy the batch for a quarter?” he appealed. “Both bushels!” I told him that although they would look great on a shelf, I would be moving myself, and I didn’t know where. He’d better junk them. Perhaps he did. They may have made a great landfill.

Graduation was June 9, 1956, under a hot sun in the football stadium. Early that Saturday morning came the announcement that Milton Eisenhower had suddenly and stealthily left for Baltimore, and Johns Hopkins, and that diplomas would be presented by Vice President Eric Walker. I would not be shaking an Eisenhower hand, but that seemed
no big deal. I had seen him on campus only once. What was more disconcerting was that I had a doctorate in hand, and still no job. And Rodelle’s pregnancy was in its ninth month.

On the Monday morning of the new week I arrived in Sparks Building as usual to look for job mail and found a note in my box. The Literature department head wanted to see me. (The merger with Composition was two years into the future.) I assumed that Brice Harris would be offering me his empty congratulations on the Ph.D. Instead I found Harris and five other senior faculty, who stood awkwardly and offered handshakes. Then Harris announced that I had a faculty appointment—on the premises. I hadn’t applied for a job at Penn State, but I had been given one anyway. It had been decided by the cabal long before. Bill Werner, Professor of American Literature, explained that to avoid complications the offer was kept quiet until all the other job applicants in Literature had been hired elsewhere. In fact, said Douglass Mead, whose church choir I hadn’t joined, inquiries from some other colleges unidentified to me had been responded to, without my knowledge, with the announcement that I was already employed. Too shocked to determine whether my reaction should be rage or elation, I said nothing, which later seemed prudent. Bruce Sutherland, the tall, laconic Scot who had been my dissertation adviser, noted that effective immediately, to recognize the change in status, I would be reassigned to an office outside the grad assistants’ “stable,” with authentic faculty.

Everyone in the room but me seemed jolly about my hiring. I never learned what colleges might have interviewed me but were quietly thrust aside. Furthermore, I had nowhere to live, as we had given notice on our apartment. After the baby arrived, Rodelle would have to relocate to Philadelphia to live temporarily with her parents. And since my job would not begin until September, I would have no earnings until the end of that month. In addition, my appointment, with doctorate, was at a wretchedly meager annual salary of $4,008, and as an instructor rather than assistant professor, the more moneyed practice in other departments in the college. It was peonage. “We know you’ll work your way up,” I was told cheerily, closing the one-way bargain. It would take three-and-a-half years.

A week later, a letter arrived from Ernest Earnest at Temple University about “a possible vacancy,” which suggested the availability of
an interim appointment. Wherever it might lead, I sent regrets. Other opportunities arrived through the summer asking whether, if a pending offer in my pocket didn’t pan out, would I still be available? I didn’t take these seriously. Very likely they were sent wholesale, as faculty mobility continued.

I moved across the hall, where the crowded office assigned to me already had six desks for six low-level, pre-war and wartime appointees grandfathered into permanency. My desk became the seventh. Greeting me, gaunt Fritz Laidlaw, one of my new desk mates, observed that his allegedly elite Harvard baccalaureate, his only degree—he was a permanent assistant professor and he had no publication record—was worth more than my inferior Penn State Ph.D. Another desk mate, who had done little over a long career, assured me that once he had time after retirement he would write the definitive work on Thomas Hardy’s sonnets. Still another edited the locally produced poetry magazine *Pivot*, for which he had solicited a wry blurb from Columbia University poet Mark van Doren: “*Pivot* deserves everything that is said about it.” The quote sat proudly atop the masthead of every issue. It was a great start for me.

On June 30, 1956, Rodelle gave birth to Mark Bennett in the hospital in Bellefonte where I had last been after ferrying Alice through the snow. Again it was an early morning. While I awaited the delivery, another prospective father also paced the floor. He worked on a small farm in the county but his sister, he claimed proudly, had made the big time. She was a waitress in a diner just off the Penn State campus, known widely for its sticky cinnamon buns. Ye Olde College Diner survived until 2018; now, their World Famous Grilled Stickies are available only for on-line purchase.

With no summer income I grabbed at anything, which meant taking up an offer—as I had been a playground supervisor in Philadelphia the previous summer—to run a three-week day camp beginning in late July for fourteen assorted and very spoiled children, ages five to fifteen, of attendees at a three-week university seminar. My base was the Alpha Epsilon Pi fraternity house. My equipment—which I purchased at Rodelle’s suggestion—was a red ball, a box of crayons, a ream of paper, some tempera paints and cheap brushes, a pound of macaroni for stringing, and a scissors, which I kept in my possession to prevent
stabbings. I experienced only three rainless days, but set up, anyway, a volleyball court with a clothesline for a net, for the larger beasts, while I read stories to the small fry and encouraged them to act out what I described. I also invented a play about devils—which most were—for which all the kids made props and masks. “The Good Deed”—a deliberately ironic title—was performed for the parents on Thursday evening, July 24, at seven. It was the finale. The last day was Friday, after which I began the process of moving Rodelle and baby Mark to Philadelphia.

Our lease expired on August 15, in advance of the next semester. After ferrying everything that fit in the Ford to 2122 Spring Garden Street, I returned to oversee the storage of our remaining possessions—eventually, the storage before we could retrieve anything cost us more than purchasing the little schoolhouse with the red siding would have. My situation, alone and in need of a bed, elicited exactly one offer of temporary housing. I moved in, to a sofa bed, with a young political science professor, Frank Sorauf, with whom I had often had dinner before Rodelle and I were married. (He would later become a Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota.) And between commutes to Philadelphia, I began looking for an apartment for baby and us. After laboriously typing and posting dozens of fruitless job-hunting letters, I had no local home, and a job for which I hadn’t applied. My writing life had begun.

**Endnotes**

1. Barth was on the faculty from 1953 until 1965; he won the National Book Award for fiction for *Chimera* (1972).

2. The Pennsylvania State University was founded in 1852 as the Farmer’s High School of Pennsylvania, changed names in 1862 to the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania and again in 1874 to the Pennsylvania State College.

3. Later renamed Connie Mack Stadium, since demolished.

4. The woman who was appointed soon married, became pregnant, and dropped out.

5. Robert Glenn “Bob” Weaver was on the roster of the Hickory Rebels, of the North Carolina State League, and the Newport News Builders, of the Virginia
League, in 1942, both minor league affiliates of the Philadelphia Athletics. He also pitched exhibitions for the Athletics. He was a Professor of English at Penn State from 1958 until 1985.