My Responsibility as a Writer

Melanie J. Harris
English Honors Project
April 1994

Fiction is conversation. When I write, I am obviously engaging in dialogue with my reader, through my art. Within this larger conversation, other conversations necessary to it also take place. The writer converses with herself and her work, and the reader converses with the work as well.

Ultimately derived from the Latin *conversari*, "converse" means to keep company with, to *live* with. For both the writer and the reader, "keeping company" is a good way of understanding fiction, and fiction is powerful because it provides a means of "living with," not only in the moment but after the pencil has been laid down or the book tucked back onto the shelf.

The desire to take part in a sharing dialogue presupposes our care for own thoughts and feelings as well as for the other--and if this is true, it follows that we will also care about the words we use and the form they take, so that we can communicate effectively. If to nothing else, we owe responsibility, it seems to me, to that which and those who

matter to us, that which and those whom we do care about. If I did not care about myself, my reader, and my art, I would not write.

If I want truly to communicate, I must imagine the reader's mind as I converse. This is less imagining the mind of a particular reader than imagining a mind that is not my own. I must step out of my own mind and view my words as if (imagining that) I am in another mind. Words that hold perfect meaning for me may be somewhat or completely unclear to my reader, and since I do not have my reader physically present to say, "I do not understand you," I must try my hardest as I write to ensure his understanding. I must imagine the other. The writer who does not anticipate either writes solely for herself (fine for journal writing or self-exploration alone) or does not care whether her reader understands. In the latter case, the writer is not truly engaging in conversation. William Gass, for example, fails to understand and value the role of the reader. He writes, "The novelist's words are not notes which he is begging the reader to play, as if his novel needed something more done to it in order to leap into existence" (47). He further rules out the role of the reader's imagination by saying that if a writer does not specifically state that a character has, for instance, a nose, then that character is noseless.

In my story "The Envelope," which I am currently revising, I have the following paragraph:

> When the last diners had gone, he cleaned off their table and sank into the chair opposite the one where the young woman with the ruby earrings had sat. When Rostini came out to find him, Neal was fingering a matchbook; his lips were moving, but he was making no sound. Only after the man had gone did Neal realize he had been there. He stood up, wondering why he hadn't said anything, pushed the chair in, and carried the dirty dishes into the kitchen.

When I wrote this paragraph, I knew that "the man" and the several "he"s caused some ambiguity. Ambiguity can be good in a story if it opens up meaningful possibilities, but if the writer is not in control or the ambiguity backfires, the conversation breaks down. Though I resisted at first, this looks to me now like a case of ambiguity backfire. Very likely, this paragraph (which comes at a crucial point in the story, as I see it) could be a good deal more powerful. When I wrote it, I knew how I wanted the ambiguity to serve, but I was guilty of not thinking enough about my reader's response to the ambiguity. I failed to imagine and thus failed in my responsibility.

My care for my reader goes well beyond a concern for making myself clear to him, however; I care about him as a person. In our individualistic society, we can easily forget that we are members of the human community. A willingness--and even an eagerness--to care for one another (and by extension the community as a whole) ought to be intrinsic in

our lives not only because strengthening our community will benefit us as individuals but also because understanding that the other is human, just as we ourselves are human, we are compelled to offer him respect and love. Because I believe this, I would hope that anyone, no matter what her calling, would concern herself with the effects of her life and work on other persons. My exploration of my responsibility as a writer thus begins not with the question of *whether* I have a responsibility, but how I can be *most* responsible.

Philip Sidney wrote in the late sixteenth century that the writer "doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue: even as the child is often brought to take the most wholesome things by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant taste" (642). One's job in writing, he says, is to tell what should or should not be.

Is this what I should intend when I write? What kind of relationship am I setting up with my reader if I place myself above him, presuming that my duty is to impart a value system (that I somehow know to be correct) to him? If I treat my reader in this way, I am not conversing with him but preaching to him.

Wayne Booth offers a better understanding of the writer/reader relationship: he sees it as a friendship. Writing about Yeats, he says, "He wins my friendship, as my real friends do, by offering a distinctive, engaging way of being together" (216). From the writer's point of view,

then, I find it best to imagine my reader as a peer, conversing with whom I create and develop a sharing relationship.

Now I must consider what I will share and how I will go about sharing it. I must look to myself. I cannot be honest with my reader without first being true to myself. Before I can be responsible to him, in other words, I must be responsible to myself.

Of course, who I am and my vision of the world will inform an honest conversation. Just as certainly, who I am and my vision of the world are always open (must always remain open) to development. As a responsible human being, I want to grow, and in order to do so, I must work to understand myself and my world better. Thus, I converse with myself; I write.

Writing clarifies. It does so in one way because I must select words in order to express myself. In order to communicate, I have to shape my thoughts and feelings using language. The necessity of choosing words and creating sentences forces the soup of my mind into a lucidity that it most likely would not otherwise find. And, as mentioned earlier, the presence of another creates the need to be clear not only to myself but to him. Striving for precision for his sake, I define my thoughts for myself as well.

Writing also clarifies because it puts me in touch with my subconscious. This part of the mind, the realm of dreams and intuition, creates order--makes connections--in a way

the conscious mind does not readily do. After I have worked my way to the end of a story, I revise. I "see again" what I have written, partly--mainly, really--because the subconscious, constantly at work, has informed to some degree the choices I've made. In revising, I go back, carefully reading what I have written and listening for the voice of my subconscious mind to speak to me from the page.

"The Envelope" is about a young man, Neal, who learns from a letter that a woman he used to love has gotten married. Earlier revisions, focused on actions of the character and images, showed me that Neal (though he was not fully conscious of it) had secluded himself from relationships and that his life had become, like the envelope he received, constraining, lumpy, and flimsy. I also realized that the story had a lot to do with stickiness and being stuck. Now as I revise again, with an eye to words and phrases, the voice of the subconscious continues to surprise me, as in the following sentence:

> He ran downstairs, tried to leap across the clammy cement floor on his toes, grabbed a shirt, charged back up the stairs two at a time, checked the hall clock on the way by: already running three minutes late.

Without even knowing it, I chose words that *feel* sticky. "Clammy cement" could just as easily have been "smooth concrete," or even "brown tile." Such are the discoveries that writers smile at when we revise, and then hold in our conscious minds, weighing other word choices against them. I

might now, for instance, think about changing "charged" and "checked" because they aren't giving a gummy feel at all. But I decide not to, for these, too, are serving their purpose. They add to the fast-paced rhythm of the sentence (more on this later) and put into our ears the sound of repeated heavy footfalls.

I am also finding as I revise that sound and touch and color are important to this story. Why does red come up over and over again? How does Neal's fingering objects relate to his character? When my conscious mind can make the connections my unconscious has already made, I will better understand my story, myself, and ideally, a small truth of life. This truth will not necessarily be--very likely will not be--revolutionary; it may be an understanding of human beings or one other human being or even myself that I did not have before, or a reminder of something--the vulnerability of the heart, the undying nature of hope--I had known once and forgotten. Nor will it necessarily or likely be an absolute truth. It will be my discovery for the moment, through this story, and it may be altered or added to (or it may hold) as I continue to write and live. Far from being weak or inadequate, a story's bringing me to a temporary understanding or a small truth is not only perfectly acceptable but right, it seems to me. As Henry James explains, "The house of fiction has . . . not one window, but a million" (46). As I move from window to window, from story to story and day to day, what I see from each may differ be-

cause of distance, angle, light, the thickness of the pane. My responsibility is not to distort my vision so that the world looks the same from each window (or, worse, to only look out one or two windows) but to explore, to keep peering through windows--and to rub them as clean as I can.

In addition to myself, I must be responsible to my art before I can be responsible to my reader. I cannot expect to engage my reader--or write a worthwhile story--if I do not take care in writing. I converse with my art in one way by negotiating with the language, the words on the page. In the sentence we looked at earlier, Neal is hurrying to get ready for work:

> He ran downstairs, tried to leap across the clammy cement floor on his toes, grabbed a shirt, charged back up the stairs two at a time, checked the hall clock on the way by: already running three minutes late.

Because Neal is rushing, I wanted to give the sentence a fast pace. I could have written, "He ran downstairs. As he tried to leap across the clammy cement floor on his toes, he saw the shirts lying in a heap on the other side of the room. He selected one, then ran back upstairs," etc. But the rhythm of the passage would not have fit the action, nor would the reader have experienced the breathlessness that Neal felt. Once I got this sentence right, I had to work with the rhythm of the sentences around it in order to attain a flow within the paragraph and not overdo the fast pacing.

My conversation with my art also involves engaging myself with the character and his world. I ask the character what he would think and how he would act and what his world means to him. As I wrote about Neal, I learned that he would live in Alaska and eat granola bars and have his porchlight on a timer. Understanding a character in this way makes him and his world believable, as they must be. This is not to say that magic and fantasy are ruled out, but the story must "feel right" to the reader: he must believe that the events could not have unfolded in any other way. I make my character real by understanding and caring about him as a human being. Again, I must imagine a mind--this time, a specific mind--other than my own. Italo Calvino thinks that a machine could write fiction. He says that writing is entirely empirical and "is purely and simply a process of combination among given elements" (17). Northrop Frye similarly states that the "primary literary aim [is] producing a structure of words for its own sake. . . . Wherever we have an autonomous verbal structure of this kind, we have literature" (74). I have trouble understanding these comments because they dismiss fiction's heart--its humanness. Certainly, technique and craft play a large part in literature, but that is not all that fiction is. Without a tear, a sigh, a laugh, or a hooray, all the skill in the world cannot produce great literature. I have more difficulty reading Calvino's comment because he writes fiction (Frye is a critic). He, too, may have difficulty with himself: he

seems to contradict himself later when he says, "What we ask of writers is that they guarantee the survival of what we call *human* in a world where everything appears inhuman" (95).

I agree with John Gardner and Frank Palmer and Wayne Booth that our relationship to fiction involves, above all, emotional engagement with character. As Booth puts it, "When we lose our capacity to succumb [to see the world as the character sees it], when we reach a point at which no other character can manage to enter our imaginative or emotional or intellectual territory and take over, at least for the time being, then we are dead on our feet" (257). This is imaginative empathy--"the capacity to change places, imaginatively, with another" (Palmer 240). (I spoke earlier of Gass's failings in imagining his reader; I believe they grow out of a deeper fault. In an affront to the very nature of literature [and making me feel sorry for him, actually], Gass writes that "no one really believes in any other feelings than his own" (32).) The human capacity for imaginative empathy is a basic--and for me the most important--quality of fiction. I imagine my character and can thereby understand and care about him.

And my caring about my character leads my reader, in conversation with me through my art, to care as well. More than simply sharing my vision with my reader when I write, I share the opportunity to be imaginatively empathetic with a character. Imagining ourselves into the world of a charac-

ter does not necessarily change the way we live (though it may), but for a brief time, we see and feel a world that is not our own. Mentally stepping outside ourselves is good in itself simply because it precludes selfishness. But it also has further possibilities for attitudes and action. Our emotional involvement with the character may allow us to take on some of the character's strengths, as John Gardner suggests: "The sense of courage that a reader shares vicariously with a character--when he goes out into the world he carries a little of that" (Bellamy 182). Or, our emotional involvement may carry over into our lives in the way that we view and treat other people: Writing and reading, we exercise our ability to empathize with another; how marvelous if this ability is then transferred to our day-to-day situations with "real-life others" as well. How much better we would live in our human community if each of us were better able to imagine ourselves in another mind, another life.

Living along with a character can also remind us of what is good--and bad--in humanity; unfortunately, it may be necessary today even to reestablish, for some, that real goods and bads exist. Though I have worked through many of my questions concerning responsibility, I have come around again to the writer-reader conversation and ultimately find myself facing an issue about which I have not come to a conclusion. Whether reminded or reestablishing, ought I to hold up humanity's goods for celebration, or should I simply explore a character and his world, allowing the reader's re-

sponse to be reminder enough? To put it another way, should my character be a model, or is his being an other for my reader to engage imaginatively with enough?

On the first side is John Gardner. He says that "true art . . . clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets toward the future, carefully judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns" (100). This must be distinguished from Sidney's argument because Gardner believes that "art's chief value is that it takes nothing for granted" (99); it is important, he says, "precisely because it does *not* start out with clear knowledge of what it means to say" (13). Gardner believes in the power of the *process* of fiction to lead the writer to truth. I said earlier that writing clarifies, and I believe it. (Gardner has had such an influence on me that I sometimes have trouble distinguishing between the beliefs I've had about writing from the beginning and those I've picked up from him along the way.) But his call for models is extreme, and as I said, I can't completely give myself over (though at times I've thought I had, only to find myself a week later seemingly given fully to Palmer's point of view [to be discussed in a moment]; the cycle continues). For example, Gardner writes,

> Shakespeare's Macbeth leaves true morality partly to implication or at best in the hands of some minor character. . . . Today . . . the resolution never to

> behave like Macbeth does not inevitably carry any clear implication of what to do instead. (107)

Of course, Gardner is not saying that *Macbeth* is bad or wrong, but that it is not as moral as a piece of literature could possibly be. Even with that point well taken, my love of Shakespeare alone keeps me from fully embracing this argument. Further, it seems to me (gulp) a narrow conception of literature that can consider our main response to *Macbeth* to be whether we should behave like Macbeth or not.

Palmer (his *Literature and Moral Understanding* is wonderful) also talks about Macbeth:

> We are acquainted with the horror of Macbeth's passage into evil, not merely because we witness it as spectators, but because we also make the journey with him. He is not the distant and indistinct figure we might read about in a newspaper, but a man whose doubts, fears, desires, ambition, and sense of guilt we are invited to share. (216)

Palmer's understanding feels to me much more reasonable and truer to the power of literature.

It may appear as if I've committed myself to one side through this discussion, but I have far from invalidated Gardner's argument for myself. Even though I may never agree with his Macbeth argument, a large part of me can believe that *today* literature--*my* fiction--can and should hold up models for the good of our struggling world. A large part of me, too, knows that I can't argue with Palmer's

understanding of the value of imaginative emotional engagement with another, regardless of whether we should model our lives after him.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner said,

> I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail . . . because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man; it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail. (120)

I find this hard to argue with and would rejoice if one day my fiction could be one those pillars, but whether I can best work toward that goal by following Gardner or following Palmer, I still do not know, and will probably continue to ask myself for some time.

Another question which further complicates the issue concerns purpose. Even if my fiction will benefit my reader--by exercising his empathy or reminding him of human truths or in another way--is this, should this be, my *purpose* when I write, or is it simply a natural effect, so to speak, of good fiction? Again, I cannot take hold of one

side and hang on, and at this point I think the two are so tangled that they are inseparable. Perhaps they should be.

Or at least for now. I will certainly continue to struggle with these issues. In the future I will come to more conclusions--and most likely more questions. And that's okay--that's good--I must. Writing is exploring. I have a responsibility to keep questioning and keep imagining.

Works cited

Bellamy, Joe David. *The New Fiction; Interviews with Innovative American Writers.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep: an Ethics of Fiction.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Calvino, Italo. *The Uses of Literature.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986.

Faulkner, William. "Address Upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature." *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters.* ed. James B. Meriwether. New York: Random House, 1966. 119-121.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Critcism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

Gardner, John. *On Moral Fiction.* New York: Basic Books, 1978.

Gass, William. *Fiction and the Figures of Life.* Boston: Nonpareil Books, 1971.

James, Henry. *The Art of the Novel.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934.

Palmer, Frank. *Literature and Moral Understanding.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Sidney, Philip. *Defence of Poesie* (excerpt, 1595). *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature.* ed. Frank Kermode, *et al.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. 637-49.

Melanie J. Harris

The Envelope

Mail for Neal meant white nine-by-four-inch envelopes that implacably read either BULK RATE or STATEMENT ENCLOSED, and, most often, held his name, misspelled, behind a little cellophane window. Recently, he'd gotten small thrills out of printing on these envelopes in large, red letters, RETURN TO SENDER, NOT ACCEPTED, and tossing them back in the mailbox. Of course, he only did that with the BULK RATEs, not the STATEMENT ENCLOSEDs; he hadn't gotten up enough guts to do that. The last time he wielded the red pen, he jotted in smaller letters, below the NOT ACCEPTED, *I don't want your junk*. He half-regretted it immediately, not knowing why and not stopping to think about it.

No wonder that last March, when he got the bulky, floppy, powder-blue envelope so big it had to be rolled to fit in his mailbox, Neal automatically assumed it had been delivered to the wrong house. Probably belongs to Mrs. Kish across the street, he thought. Looks like something she'd

get. He dropped it on his plaid stuffed chair so he'd remember to take it with him when he left for work. The rest of the day's mail he riffled through in two seconds then dumped in the trash can. He'd misplaced his red pen, and he wasn't in a mood even to acknowledge them--whoever they were, trying to needle their way into his life with these envelopes--anyway.

After frowning at his watch, Neal showered and toweled off as he scooted down the narrow hall to his bedroom. He jumped into the familiar black pleated pants and reached for a shirt. No shirts. Neal grunted, picturing them in a heap in the laundry basket. He ran downstairs, tried to leap across the clammy cement floor on his toes, grabbed a shirt, charged back up the stairs two at a time, checked the hall clock on the way by: already running three minutes late. He set up the ironing board with a clank and a thud and plugged in the iron, then danced around the board. "Heat, heat!"

The phone rang. He snatched it up, still dancing.

"'Lo?"

"Hellooo! Mr. Beck? How are yooou today?"

Neal knew that tone. "I'm fine," he said. "Look--"

"Great! And you'll soon be even better. I'm calling to inform you that you've won . . ." The man at the other end continued reading from his script.

"Excuse me," said Neal, fingering the electrical tape on the fraying iron cord. "Ex*cuse* me."

The man didn't even stop for a breath.

Neal hung up the phone quietly, smoothed his shirt on the ironing board, and slid the iron around the collar. Grinding his teeth, he slammed the iron back down and had to grab the board to steady it. He'd forgotten to turn the iron on. He flicked the switch over to COTTON, stomped out to the kitchen, and stuffed half a granola bar in his mouth.

When he finally got himself dressed, Neal whipped his leather coat out of the living room closet and lunged at the door. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the makeshift envelope.

I'll get it tomorrow. He stepped outside, pulled the door shut, and leapt off the porch. Mrs. Kish waved from her yard.

Neal felt guilty.

He went back inside and got the envelope. Holding it up in the air for her to see, he ran across the narrow street. As he reached toward her with the envelope, he glanced at the address for the first time. Neal pulled the envelope back.

"Oh."

Mrs. Kish wiped her hands on her apron and smoothed her puffy white hair. "What is it, Mr. Beck? Good news?"

"Oh." Neal looked up at her, stunned. "I thought this was for you," he said. "But it's for me."

Now Mrs. Kish looked confused.

"I'm late for work," said Neal. "I'll tell you later." He turned and hurried to his car.

The envelope lay beside him on the seat as he headed into Fairbanks. His car drifted toward the side of the road every couple minutes as Neal eyed the odd package. He couldn't make sense of it. It was covered with a pox of postmarks and had ten stamps pasted haphazardly in the corner. There was no return address. He tried to watch the road and read the postmarks at the same time, but he couldn't make them out and people were beeping their horns at him as they passed. He did see that *Neal Beck, 100 Sycamore Ave., Burdett, NY* had been crossed off and beside it had been scrawled *20 Mountain Rd., North Pole, AK.*

"Who in the world--?" Neal mumbled, and decided--since he was about to smash into the guardrail--to ignore the envelope the rest of the way to town. He held out for two minutes, then took one hand off the wheel to reach out and poke at the crinkled blue paper. He fingered the largest lump, down in the corner of the package. Finally he picked it up by the edge and shook it.

He shook his head along with it. Once he started turning the envelope around, horns began honking again. He ignored them and squinted at the postmarks: Jamaica, New York City, Ithaca, Mobile (twice), Fairbanks, Healy. The oldest was Jamaica, dated October 21. *Jamaica?*

Neal shrugged, put the envelope back down, and got off the first Fairbanks exit. As he drove through the city, he continued to glance at the inscrutable thing that had found its way into his house and now his car.

He parked in the tight gravel lot behind the restaurant, gave the envelope a little push before getting out of the car, then ran up to the back door. He stepped inside quietly, quickly put on his red bow tie and name pin, and nonchalantly strolled into the kitchen--all in vain.

"Ten minutes late," announced Rostini and lowered his meat tenderizer like a gavel. Neal slunk past and quit listening after "Is it just me, or is an assistant manager supposed to . . .". Same old routine, he thought to himself. Stuck. He checked the orders and grabbed his pad and pencil. Talk to him later, he mumbled on the way out to the candlelit dining room.

He avoided the big man with the bright eyes and gray beard all night, but at eleven o'clock they were the only ones left in the kitchen. Neal muttered an apology.

"Had some trouble on the highway," he said.

"Mmm."

Neal peered up at Rostini's unruly eyebrows, thinking they looked as if they'd been glued on.

"I trust it will be convenient for you to be here at three *o'*clock tomorrow?"

Neal nodded slightly even though he knew it wasn't a question.

Rostini wrapped his long coat across his stomach and slid the keys across the counter. "Close up," he said. "I'm going home."

When he heard the back door click shut, Neal let out his breath. He finished the dishes, wiped the counters, and stuffed the garbage in the dented can on his way out.

The dark made it easier to ignore the envelope on the drive home, though he did finger the lump in the corner a few more times. "Can't be anything important," he said out loud, and shivered against the cold--or was it at the sound of his voice?

Neal's porchlight was the only one lit on Mountain Road when he got home. (He had it on a timer.) He held the envelope up to it as he unlocked the front door, but he couldn't see through. When he got inside, he set the envelope on the plaid chair, hung up his coat, and got a drink.

"Jamaica." He said it as if it were the most ridiculous word in the English language. Yawning, he picked up the package and sat down. He turned on the TV but looked at the ceiling instead. His fingers idly played around the edges of the blue paper. How did this flimsy thing make it? he mused. And who would want to--? The noise from the TV became just a hum in Neal's ear. Maybe it's a mistake, he thought, and fell asleep.

Half an hour later, he woke up, shut off the TV, and stumbled over to the couch. He slept there the rest of the night, dreaming he was surrounded by dozens of large envelopes, all standing upright and flapping at him, though he couldn't make out what they were saying.

He woke up at five o'clock and couldn't get back to sleep. After giving the arm of the couch a good punch, he got up, made himself a cup of coffee, and sat down at his small, square kitchen table with the envelope. He told himself again that it couldn't be anything important--could even be some kind of scam. He thought he may as well open it. Probably isn't even worth my time. Once I see what it is, it'll most likely join yesterday's junk in the trash.

Determined to get it all over with and clear his mind again, Neal attacked the envelope. But he couldn't even get his fingertip under the flap; it was taped horizontally, vertically, and diagonally with what must have been two yards of Scotch tape. He considered a knife, but then merely ripped off its side, pushed the edges toward each other, and peered in with one eye. He grunted and dumped out two more envelopes.

One looked like those that usually appeared in his mailbox, except on the front was simply written *Neal* (spelled right, he noted). The other was a small manila envelope--this one had the lump in it--with *The Stuff* printed across the front.

What is this? This makes even less sense than before. Part of Neal just wanted to chuck the whole thing right then and go back to sleep, but his fingers had already started working their way under the flap of the smaller envelope.

Inside was a letter. It was folded inward, so Neal couldn't see any of what it said. He stared at it for a

minute before lifting it partway open with his index finger. He saw the date at the top--October 19--and below that, his name. Unable to ignore the large, dark handwriting, he opened up the rest of the letter, still tentative, but not knowing what else to do.

After *Neal*, it read, *Hey buddy! It's been a long time. What are you doing these days? I haven't heard a word. I'm in Jamaica right now, with my new wife. Yes, I'm married. Can you believe it? We had a very small ceremony last month. Her name's Janet. We met at work. I'm with Highland Marketing now. I'm sure you've heard of it. Anyway, we're on a trip around the world. Can you believe it? Janet's dad's one of the company executives, and we managed to work out this trip as a kind of business and pleasure thing, you know.*

Anyway, I cleaned house before I got married, and I came across a box of stuff from our dorm room. There was some stuff of yours in there I never knew I had, so I'm sending it to you. (Forgive the envelope. I had all your stuff sealed up before I realized I didn't put my letter in, so Janet whipped one up out of a couple extra promotional sheets she had.)

Oh, by the way, I heard from Johnson after the wedding. You remember Steve Johnson. He said he'd seen Joey a few months before, and you'll never guess who he married! Ann!

Neal stared at the name. Ann? Ann. Ann! He fell back in his chair as if he'd been shoved.

He breathed her name. "I almost forgot."

His mind had already shifted into reverse. Calculus. Cold pizza. Perfume. "What's your sign?" Jack's Diner. Purple beret. Jonas Park at night.

His leaned forward, propping his chin on his hand.

Ruby earrings. The watch.

Neal blinked hard and concentrated on finishing the letter.

. . . you'll never guess who he married! Ann! I couldn't believe it, but it's true. Joey hated her when you two were going out! Funny how things go.

Well, gotta run now. Drop me a line sometime. I don't have an address right now (we don't know where we're moving to yet), but you can send it to Highland. It's in Roanoke. I'll get it. Take it easy, bud.

Jim (Squeak) Norton

P.S. As a matter of fact, I think some of that dorm stuff is stuff from Ann.

Neal leaned back in his chair again, rubbed his eyes, and stared at the "stuff" envelope. The only sign of life he showed for ten minutes was the slight rising and falling of his chest.

"I have ironing to do," he said suddenly, and got up. He took a sip of his coffee, smacked his lips as if he'd never tasted it before, made a face, and dumped it away.

He left all the envelopes and the letter on the table and mechanically went about his ironing. By noon every

chore he could think of was done. He roamed through the house twice, picking up objects, turning them around and around to look at them, putting them back down. Finally he flopped on his bed, thinking he'd rest up a few minutes before getting ready for work.

He woke up at two-thirty. He didn't fly into a frenzy; he didn't run around the house; he didn't speed to work; he didn't walk away from Rostini's "If-I-didn't-desperately-need-you-right-now-I'd-fire-you-but-don't-think-you-can't-be-replaced" speech.

He did thank the new kid waiter for covering his tables, and he did manage to get everybody's order right that night. But on his way back to the kitchen after serving the Table Ten regulars, Mr. and Mrs. Archer, he glimpsed a purple hat--and dropped his tray.

Heads turned. He assured everyone except himself that he was fine. In the kitchen, he wiped the sweat from the back of his neck and straightened his tie before going back to check on the Archers.

"Is everything all right, here, Mr. and Mrs. Ann?"

Their smiles flickered.

"Archer! Excuse me. Is everything all right, Mr. and Mrs. Archer?"

Neal succeeded at being more conscientious the rest of the evening, but he couldn't keep his breath from catching in his throat when a red glove, a melody, a quick laugh, or

a shake of blonde curls shot through his senses to his heart.

When the last diners had gone, he cleaned off their table and sank into the chair opposite the one where the young woman with the ruby earrings had sat. When Rostini came out to find him, Neal was fingering a matchbook; his lips were moving, but he was making no sound. Only after the man had gone did Neal realize he had been there. He stood up, wondering why he hadn't said anything, pushed the chair in, and carried the dirty dishes into the kitchen.

He could hear Rostini's shoes scuffling across the tile floor. "Mr. Rostini?" he called hesitantly. "Did you want to--"

Rostini appeared around the corner. "We'll leave those dishes in the dishwasher for tomorrow, Neal. We're both tired. Let's go home." Rostini pursed his lips. "Do you need a ride?"

Neal shook his head, looked up into Rostini's face, shook his head again.

The man gave Neal a quick nod. "See you tomorrow, then. I'll close up."

Neal put his tie and pin away, hung his coat over his shoulders, and stepped out into the still night.

The house felt cold when he got home--it should; March in Alaska--so he left his coat on and made a cup of tea. Wrapping his coat more tightly around himself, he sat down at the table. Everything lay where he'd left it that morn-

ing. He reached for the manila envelope, opened it painstakingly with one hand (the other seemingly unwilling), and took out the first object--his fraternity key chain. He put it in his coat pocket. Next he pulled out a folded up grade report. He flattened it out, grinned, and half-seriously thought about sticking it on the refrigerator.

The lump that he had been fingering the day before seemed to be the last item, and he slipped it out of the envelope. Something else fell out along with it, but he didn't pay attention. He knew what the "lump" was. He stroked the top of the square velvet box, then opened it. The watch. He swallowed and lifted it out, held it against his wrist. It was gold, with a window for the date and the numbers one through twelve all printed on the face. He hated watches with missing numbers. He wondered how he'd gotten that watch mixed in with Jim's stuff. After graduation, he'd given it up for lost.

Neal took his coat off and turned to hang it on the back of his chair. When he turned back around, he noticed what had fallen out of the envelope with the watchbox and picked it up: a small stack of pictures held together by two rubber bands. The bottom of the stack was facing up; the back of the last picture read *Jonas Park, 1979.*

Neal finished his tea, put his cup in the sink, and hung up his coat. He slid the packet of pictures, still upside down, back into the manila envelope and closed it up. He couldn't look at them yet. After turning out the light,

he felt for the watch, wound it, and left it on the table. Holding the envelope of pictures close to his chest, he padded back the hall to his bedroom. He tucked the envelope into his bottom dresser drawer, took off his clothes, and crawled into bed.

First thing the next morning he checked the watch. Didn't work. Neal smiled sadly and nodded. "That's okay," he whispered, then got breakfast.

As soon as the mail came, he went outside to get it. Standing in the road, he shuffled through four white envelopes: BULK RATE, BULK RATE, BULK RATE, STATEMENT ENCLOSED. Even as he exhaled with relief, Neal leaned over to check the box again.