

American Pastoral

Philip Roth



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

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Books by Philip Roth

GOODBYE, COLUMBUS

LETTING GO

WHEN SHE WAS GOOD

PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT

OUR GANG

THE BREAST

THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL

MY LIFE AS A MAN

READING MYSELF AND OTHERS

THE PROFESSOR OF DESIRE

THE GHOST WRITER

ZUCKERMAN UNBOUND

THE ANATOMY LESSON

THE PRAGUE ORGY

ZUCKERMAN BOUND

THE COUNTERLIFE

THE FACTS

DECEPTION

PATRIMONY

OPERATION SHYLOCK

SABBATH'S THEATER

AMERICAN PASTORAL

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To J. G.

Dream when the day is thru,
Dream and they might come true,
Things never are as bad as they seem,
So dream, dream, dream.

— JOHNNY MERCER,
from "Dream," popular song of the 1940s

the rare occurrence of the expected . . .

— WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS,
from "At Kenneth Burke's Place," 1946

I

Paradise Remembered



I

THE SWEDE. During the war years, when I was still a grade school boy, this was a magical name in our Newark neighborhood, even to adults just a generation removed from the city's old Prince Street ghetto and not yet so flawlessly Americanized as to be bowled over by the prowess of a high school athlete. The name was magical; so was the anomalous face. Of the few fair-complexioned Jewish students in our preponderantly Jewish public high school, none possessed anything remotely like the steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe as Seymour Irving Levov.

The Swede starred as end in football, center in basketball, and first baseman in baseball. Only the basketball team was ever any good—twice winning the city championship while he was its leading scorer—but as long as the Swede excelled, the fate of our sports teams didn't matter much to a student body whose elders, largely undereducated and overburdened, venerated academic achievement above all else. Physical aggression, even camouflaged by athletic uniforms and official rules and intended to do no harm to Jews, was not a traditional source of pleasure in our community—advanced degrees were. Nonetheless, through the Swede, the neighborhood entered into a fantasy about itself and about the world, the fantasy of sports fans everywhere: almost like Gentiles (as they

imagined Gentiles), our families could forget the way things actually work and make an athletic performance the repository of all their hopes. Primarily, they could forget the war.

The elevation of Swede Levov into the household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews can best be explained, I think, by the war against the Germans and the Japanese and the fears that it fostered. With the Swede indomitable on the playing field, the meaningless surface of life provided a bizarre, delusionary kind of sustenance, the happy release into a Swedean innocence, for those who lived in dread of never seeing their sons or their brothers or their husbands again.

And how did this affect him—the glorification, the sanctification, of every hook shot he sank, every pass he leaped up and caught, every line drive he rifled for a double down the left-field line? Is this what made him that staid and stone-faced boy? Or was the mature-seeming sobriety the outward manifestation of an arduous inward struggle to keep in check the narcissism that an entire community was ladling with love? The high school cheerleaders had a cheer for the Swede. Unlike the other cheers, meant to inspire the whole team or to galvanize the spectators, this was a rhythmic, foot-stomping tribute to the Swede alone, enthusiasm for his perfection undiluted and unabashed. The cheer rocked the gym at basketball games every time he took a rebound or scored a point, swept through our side of City Stadium at football games any time he gained a yard or intercepted a pass. Even at the sparsely attended home baseball games up at Irvington Park, where there was no cheerleading squad eagerly kneeling at the sidelines, you could hear it thinly chanted by the handful of Weequahic stalwarts in the wooden stands not only when the Swede came up to bat but when he made no more than a routine putout at first base. It was a cheer that consisted of eight syllables, three of them his name, and it went, Bah bah-bah! Bah bah bah . . . bah-bah! and the tempo, at football games particularly, accelerated with each repetition until, at the peak of frenzied adoration, an explosion of skirt-billowing cartwheels was ecstatically discharged and the orange gym bloom-

ers of ten sturdy little cheerleaders flickered like fireworks before our marveling eyes . . . and not for love of you or me but of the wonderful Swede. "Swede Levov! It rhymes with . . . 'The Love'! . . . Swede Levov! It rhymes with . . . 'The Love'! . . . Swede Levov! It rhymes with . . . 'The Love'!"

Yes, everywhere he looked, people were in love with him. The candy store owners we boys pestered called the rest of us "Hey-you-no!" or "Kid-cut-it-out!"; him they called, respectfully, "Swede." Parents smiled and benignly addressed him as "Seymour." The chattering girls he passed on the street would ostentatiously swoon, and the bravest would holler after him, "Come back, come back, Levov of my life!" And he let it happen, walked about the neighborhood in possession of all that love, looking as though he didn't feel a thing. Contrary to whatever daydreams the rest of us may have had about the enhancing effect on ourselves of total, uncritical, idolatrous adulation, the love thrust upon the Swede seemed actually to *deprive* him of feeling. In this boy embraced as a symbol of hope by so many—as the embodiment of the strength, the resolve, the emboldened valor that would prevail to return our high school's servicemen home unscathed from Midway, Salerno, Cherbourg, the Solomons, the Aleutians, Tarawa—there appeared to be not a drop of wit or irony to interfere with his golden gift for responsibility.

But wit or irony is like a hitch in his swing for a kid like the Swede, irony being a human consolation and beside the point if you're getting your way as a god. Either there was a whole side to his personality that he was suppressing or that was as yet asleep or, more likely, there wasn't. His aloofness, his seeming passivity as the desired object of all this asexual lovemaking, made him appear, if not divine, a distinguished cut above the more primordial humanity of just about everybody else at the school. He was fettered to history, an *instrument* of history, esteemed with a passion that might never have been if he'd broken the Weequahic basketball record—by scoring twenty-seven points against Barringer—on a day other than the sad, sad day in 1943 when fifty-eight Flying

Fortresses were shot down by Luftwaffe fighter planes, two fell victim to flak, and five more crashed after crossing the English coast on their way back from bombing Germany.

The Swede's younger brother was my classmate, Jerry Levov, a scrawny, small-headed, oddly overflexible boy built along the lines of a licorice stick, something of a mathematical wizard, and the January 1950 valedictorian. Though Jerry never really had a friendship with anyone, in his imperious, irascible way, he took an interest in me over the years, and that was how I wound up, from the age of ten, regularly getting beaten by him at Ping-Pong in the finished basement of the Levovs' one-family house, on the corner of Wyndmoor and Keer—the word “finished” indicating that it was paneled in knotty pine, domesticated, and not, as Jerry seemed to think, that the basement was the perfect place for finishing off another kid.

The explosiveness of Jerry's aggression at a Ping-Pong table exceeded his brother's in any sport. A Ping-Pong ball is, brilliantly, sized and shaped so that it cannot take out your eye. I would not otherwise have played in Jerry Levov's basement. If it weren't for the opportunity to tell people that I knew my way around Swede Levov's house, nobody could have got me down into that basement, defenseless but for a small wooden paddle. Nothing that weighs as little as a Ping-Pong ball can be lethal, yet when Jerry whacked that thing murder couldn't have been far from his mind. It never occurred to me that this violent display might have something to do with what it was like for him to be the kid brother of Swede Levov. Since I couldn't imagine anything better than being the Swede's brother—short of being the Swede himself—I failed to understand that for Jerry it might be difficult to imagine anything worse.

The Swede's bedroom—which I never dared enter but would pause to gaze into when I used the toilet outside Jerry's room—was tucked under the eaves at the back of the house. With its slanted ceiling and dormer windows and Weequahic pennants on the walls, it looked like what I thought of as a real boy's room. From the two windows that opened out over the back lawn you could see the roof

of the Levovs' garage, where the Swede as a grade school kid practiced hitting in the wintertime by swinging at a baseball taped to a cord hung from a rafter—an idea he might have got from a baseball novel by John R. Tunis called *The Kid from Tomkinsville*. I came to that book and to other of Tunis's baseball books—*Iron Duke*, *The Duke Decides*, *Champion's Choice*, *Keystone Kids*, *Rookie of the Year*—by spotting them on the built-in shelf beside the Swede's bed, all lined up alphabetically between two solid bronze bookends that had been a bar mitzvah gift, miniaturized replicas of Rodin's “The Thinker.” Immediately I went to the library to borrow all the Tunis books I could find and started with *The Kid from Tomkinsville*, a grim, gripping book to a boy, simply written, stiff in places but direct and dignified, about the Kid, Roy Tucker, a clean-cut young pitcher from the rural Connecticut hills whose father dies when he is four and whose mother dies when he is sixteen and who helps his grandmother make ends meet by working the family farm during the day and working at night in town at “MacKenzie's drugstore on the corner of South Main.”

The book, published in 1940, had black-and-white drawings that, with just a little expressionistic distortion and just enough anatomical skill, cannily pictorialize the hardness of the Kid's life, back before the game of baseball was illuminated with a million statistics, back when it was about the mysteries of earthly fate, when major leaguers looked less like big healthy kids and more like lean and hungry workingmen. The drawings seemed conceived out of the dark austerities of Depression America. Every ten pages or so, to succinctly depict a dramatic physical moment in the story—“He was able to put a little steam in it,” “It was over the fence,” “Razzle limped to the dugout”—there is a blackish, ink-heavy rendering of a scrawny, shadow-faced ballplayer starkly silhouetted on a blank page, isolated, like the world's most lonesome soul, from both nature and man, or set in a stippled simulation of ballpark grass, dragging beneath him the skinny statuette of a wormlike shadow. He is unglamorous even in a baseball uniform; if he is the pitcher, his gloved hand looks like a paw; and what image after image

makes graphically clear is that playing up in the majors, heroic though it may seem, is yet another form of backbreaking, unremunerative labor.

The Kid from Tomkinsville could as well have been called *The Lamb from Tomkinsville*, even *The Lamb from Tomkinsville Led to the Slaughter*. In the Kid's career as the spark-plug newcomer to a last-place Brooklyn Dodger club, each triumph is rewarded with a punishing disappointment or a crushing accident. The staunch attachment that develops between the lonely, homesick Kid and the Dodgers' veteran catcher, Dave Leonard, who successfully teaches him the ways of the big leagues and who, "with his steady brown eyes behind the plate," shepherds him through a no-hitter, comes brutally undone six weeks into the season, when the old-timer is dropped overnight from the club's roster. "Here was a speed they didn't often mention in baseball: the speed with which a player rises—and goes down." Then, after the Kid wins his fifteenth consecutive game—a rookie record that no pitcher in either league has ever exceeded—he's accidentally knocked off his feet in the shower by boisterous teammates who are horsing around after the great victory, and the elbow injury sustained in the fall leaves him unable ever to pitch again. He rides the bench for the rest of the year, pinch-hitting because of his strength at the plate, and then, over the snowy winter—back home in Connecticut spending days on the farm and evenings at the drugstore, well known now but really Grandma's boy all over again—he works diligently by himself on Dave Leonard's directive to keep his swing level ("A tendency to keep his right shoulder down, to swing up, was his worst fault"), suspending a ball from a string out in the barn and whacking at it on cold winter mornings with "his beloved bat" until he has worked himself into a sweat. "Crack . . ." The clean sweet sound of a bat squarely meeting a ball." By the next season he is ready to return to the Dodgers as a speedy right fielder, bats .325 in the second spot, and leads his team down to the wire as a contender. On the last day of the season, in a game against the Giants, who are in first place by only half a game, the Kid kindles the Dodgers'

hitting attack, and in the bottom of the fourteenth—with two down, two men on, and the Dodgers ahead on a run scored by the Kid with his audacious, characteristically muscular baserunning—he makes the final game-saving play, a running catch smack up against the right center-field wall. That tremendous daredevil feat sends the Dodgers into the World Series and leaves him "writhing in agony on the green turf of deep right center." Tunis concludes like this: "Dusk descended upon a mass of players, on a huge crowd pouring onto the field, on a couple of men carrying an inert form through the mob on a stretcher. . . . There was a clap of thunder. Rain descended upon the Polo Grounds." Descended, descended, a clap of thunder, and thus ends the boys' Book of Job.

I was ten and I had never read anything like it. The cruelty of life. The injustice of it. I could not believe it. The reprehensible member of the Dodgers is Razzle Nugent, a great pitcher but a drunk and a hothead, a violent bully fiercely jealous of the Kid. And yet it is not Razzle carried off "inert" on a stretcher but the best of them all, the farm orphan called the Kid, modest, serious, chaste, loyal, naive, undiscourageable, hard-working, soft-spoken, courageous, a brilliant athlete, a beautiful, austere boy. Needless to say, I thought of the Swede and the Kid as one and wondered how the Swede could bear to read this book that had left me near tears and unable to sleep. Had I had the courage to address him, I would have asked if he thought the ending meant the Kid was finished or whether it meant the possibility of yet another comeback. The word "inert" terrified me. Was the Kid *killed* by the last catch of the year? Did the Swede know? Did he care? Did it occur to him that if disaster could strike down the Kid from Tomkinsville, it could come and strike the great Swede down too? Or was a book about a sweet star savagely and unjustly punished—a book about a greatly gifted innocent whose worst fault is a tendency to keep his right shoulder down and swing up but whom the thundering heavens destroy nonetheless—simply a book between those "Thinker" bookends up on his shelf?

*

Keer Avenue was where the rich Jews lived—or rich they seemed to most of the families who rented apartments in the two-, three-, and four-family dwellings with the brick stoops integral to our after-school sporting life: the crap games, the blackjack, and the stoop-ball, endless until the cheap rubber ball hurled mercilessly against the steps went pop and split at the seam. Here, on this grid of locust-tree-lined streets into which the Lyons farm had been partitioned during the boom years of the early twenties, the first postimmigrant generation of Newark's Jews had regrouped into a community that took its inspiration more from the mainstream of American life than from the Polish shtetl their Yiddish-speaking parents had re-created around Prince Street in the impoverished Third Ward. The Keer Avenue Jews, with their finished basements, their screened-in porches, their flagstone front steps, seemed to be at the forefront, laying claim like audacious pioneers to the normalizing American amenities. And at the vanguard of the vanguard were the Levovs, who had bestowed upon us our very own Swede, a boy as close to a goy as we were going to get.

The Levovs themselves, Lou and Sylvia, were parents neither more nor less recognizably American than my own Jersey-born Jewish mother and father, no more or less refined, well spoken, or cultivated. And that to me was a big surprise. Other than the one-family Keer Avenue house, there was no division between us like the one between the peasants and the aristocracy I was learning about at school. Mrs. Levov was, like my own mother, a tidy housekeeper, impeccably well mannered, a nice-looking woman tremendously considerate of everyone's feelings, with a way of making her sons feel important—one of the many women of that era who never dreamed of being free of the great domestic enterprise centered on the children. From their mother both Levov boys had inherited the long bones and fair hair, though since her hair was redder, frizzier, and her skin still youthfully freckled, she looked less startlingly Aryan than they did, less vivid a genetic oddity among the faces in our streets.

The father was no more than five seven or eight—a spidery man

even more agitated than the father whose anxieties were shaping my own. Mr. Levov was one of those slum-reared Jewish fathers whose rough-hewn, undereducated perspective goaded a whole generation of striving, college-educated Jewish sons: a father for whom everything is an unshakable duty, for whom there is a right way and a wrong way and nothing in between, a father whose compound of ambitions, biases, and beliefs is so unruffled by careful thinking that he isn't as easy to escape from as he seems. Limited men with limitless energy; men quick to be friendly and quick to be fed up; men for whom the most serious thing in life is *to keep going despite everything*. And we were their sons. It was our job to love them.

The way it fell out, my father was a chiropodist whose office was for years our living room and who made enough money for our family to get by on but no more, while Mr. Levov got rich manufacturing ladies' gloves. His own father—Swede Levov's grandfather—had come to Newark from the old country in the 1890s and found work fleshing sheepskins fresh from the lime vat, the lone Jew alongside the roughest of Newark's Slav, Irish, and Italian immigrants in the Nuttman Street tannery of the patent-leather tycoon T. P. Howell, then *the* name in the city's oldest and biggest industry, the tanning and manufacture of leather goods. The most important thing in making leather is water—skins spinning in big drums of water, drums spewing out befouled water, pipes gushing with cool and hot water, hundreds of thousands of gallons of water. If there's soft water, good water, you can make beer and you can make leather, and Newark made both—big breweries, big tanneries, and, for the immigrant, lots of wet, smelly, crushing work.

The son Lou—Swede Levov's father—went to work in the tannery after leaving school at fourteen to help support the family of nine and became adept not only at dyeing buckskin by laying on the clay dye with a flat, stiff brush but also at sorting and grading skins. The tannery that stank of both the slaughterhouse and the chemical plant from the soaking of flesh and the cooking of flesh and the dehairing and pickling and degreasing of hides,

where round the clock in the summertime the blowers drying the thousands and thousands of hanging skins raised the temperature in the low-ceilinged dry room to a hundred and twenty degrees, where the vast vat rooms were dark as caves and flooded with swill, where brutish workmen, heavily aproned, armed with hooks and staves, dragging and pushing overloaded wagons, wringing and hanging waterlogged skins, were driven like animals through the laborious storm that was a twelve-hour shift—a filthy, stinking place awash with water dyed red and black and blue and green, with hunks of skin all over the floor, everywhere pits of grease, hills of salt, barrels of solvent—this was Lou Levov's high school and college. What was amazing was not how tough he turned out. What was amazing was how civil he could sometimes still manage to be.

From Howell & Co. he graduated in his early twenties to found, with two of his brothers, a small handbag outfit specializing in alligator skins contracted from R. G. Salomon, Newark's king of cordovan leather and leader in the tanning of alligator; for a time the business looked as if it might flourish, but after the crash the company went under, bankrupting the three hustling, audacious Levovs. Newark Maid Leatherware started up a few years later, with Lou Levov, now on his own, buying seconds in leather goods—imperfect handbags, gloves, and belts—and selling them out of a pushcart on weekends and door-to-door at night. Down Neck—the semi-peninsular protuberance that is easternmost Newark, where each fresh wave of immigrants first settled, the lowlands bounded to the north and east by the Passaic River and to the south by the salt marshes—there were Italians who'd been glovers in the old country and they began doing piecework for him in their homes. Out of the skins he supplied they cut and sewed ladies' gloves that he peddled around the state. By the time the war broke out, he had a collective of Italian families cutting and stitching kid gloves in a small loft on West Market Street. It was a marginal business, no real money, until, in 1942, the bonanza: a black, lined sheepskin dress glove, ordered by the Women's Army Corps. He

leased the old umbrella factory, a smoke-darkened brick pile fifty years old and four stories high on Central Avenue and 2nd Street, and very shortly purchased it outright, leasing the top floor to a zipper company. Newark Maid began pumping out gloves, and every two or three days the truck backed up and took them away.

A cause for jubilation even greater than the government contract was the Bamberger account. Newark Maid cracked Bamberger's, and then became the major manufacturer of their fine ladies' gloves, because of an unlikely encounter between Lou Levov and Louis Bamberger. At a ceremonial dinner for Meyer Ellenstein, a city commissioner since 1933 and the only Jew ever to be mayor of Newark, some higher-up from Bam's, hearing that Swede Levov's father was present, came over to congratulate him on his boy's selection by the *Newark News* as an all-county center in basketball. Alert to the opportunity of a lifetime—the opportunity to cut through all obstructions and go right to the top—Lou Levov brazenly talked his way into an introduction, right there at the Ellenstein dinner, to the legendary L. Bamberger himself, founder of Newark's most prestigious department store and the philanthropist who'd given the city its museum, a powerful personage as meaningful to local Jews as Bernard Baruch was meaningful to Jews around the country for his close association with FDR. According to the gossip that permeated the neighborhood, although Bamberger barely did more than shake Lou Levov's hand and quiz him (about the Swede) for a couple of minutes at most, Lou Levov had dared to say to his face, "Mr. Bamberger, we've got the quality, we've got the price—why can't we sell you people gloves?" And before the month was out, Bam's had placed an order with Newark Maid, its first, for five hundred dozen pairs.

By the end of the war, Newark Maid had established itself—in no small part because of Swede Levov's athletic achievement—as one of the most respected names in ladies' gloves south of Gloversville, New York, the center of the glove trade, where Lou Levov shipped his hides by rail, through Fultonville, to be tanned by the best glove tannery in the business. Little more than a decade later, with the

opening of a factory in Puerto Rico in 1958, the Swede would himself become the young president of the company, commuting every morning down to Central Avenue from his home some thirty-odd miles west of Newark, out past the suburbs—a short-range pioneer living on a hundred-acre farm on a back road in the sparsely habitated hills beyond Morristown, in wealthy, rural Old Rimrock, New Jersey, a long way from the tannery floor where Grandfather Levov had begun in America, paring away from the true skin the rubbery flesh that had ghoulishly swelled to twice its thickness in the great lime vats.

The day after graduating Weequahic in June '45, the Swede had joined the Marine Corps, eager to be in on the fighting that ended the war. It was rumored that his parents were beside themselves and did everything to talk him out of the marines and get him into the navy. Even if he surmounted the notorious Marine Corps anti-Semitism, did he imagine himself surviving the invasion of Japan? But the Swede would not be dissuaded from meeting the manly, patriotic challenge—secretly set for himself just after Pearl Harbor—of going off to fight as one of the toughest of the tough should the country still be at war when he graduated high school. He was just finishing up his boot training at Parris Island, South Carolina—where the scuttlebutt was that the marines were to hit the Japanese beaches on March 1, 1946—when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. As a result, the Swede got to spend the rest of his hitch as a “recreation specialist” right there on Parris Island. He ran the calisthenic drill for his battalion for half an hour before breakfast every morning, arranged for the boxing smokers to entertain the recruits a couple of nights a week, and the bulk of the time played for the base team against armed forces teams throughout the South, basketball all winter long, baseball all summer long. He was stationed down in South Carolina about a year when he became engaged to an Irish Catholic girl whose father, a marine major and a one-time Purdue football coach, had procured him the cushy job as drill instructor in order to keep him at Parris Island to play ball. Several months before the Swede's

discharge, his own father made a trip to Parris Island, stayed for a full week, near the base at the hotel in Beaufort, and departed only when the engagement to Miss Dunleavy had been broken off. The Swede returned home in '47 to enroll at Upsala College, in East Orange, at twenty unencumbered by a Gentile wife and all the more glamorously heroic for having made his mark as a Jewish marine—a drill instructor no less, and at arguably the cruellest military training camp anywhere in the world. Marines are made at boot camp, and Seymour Irving Levov had helped to make them.

We knew all this because the mystique of the Swede lived on in the corridors and classrooms of the high school, where I was by then a student. I remember two or three times one spring trekking out with friends to Viking Field in East Orange to watch the Upsala baseball team play a Saturday home game. Their star cleanup hitter and first baseman was the Swede. Three home runs one day against Muhlenberg. Whenever we saw a man in the stands wearing a suit and a hat we would whisper to one another, “A scout, a scout!” I was away at college when I heard from a schoolyard pal still living in the neighborhood that the Swede had been offered a contract with a Double A Giant farm club but had turned it down to join his father's company instead. Later I learned through my parents about the Swede's marriage to Miss New Jersey. Before competing at Atlantic City for the 1949 Miss America title, she had been Miss Union County, and before that Spring Queen at Upsala. From Elizabeth. A shiksa. Dawn Dwyer. He'd done it.

One night in the summer of 1985, while visiting New York, I went out to see the Mets play the Astros, and while circling the stadium with my friends, looking for the gate to our seats, I saw the Swede, thirty-six years older than when I'd watched him play ball for Upsala. He wore a white shirt, a striped tie, and a charcoal-gray summer suit, and he was still terrifically handsome. The golden hair was a shade or two darker but not any thinner; no longer was it cut short but fell rather fully over his ears and down to his collar.

In this suit that fit him so exquisitely he seemed even taller and leaner than I remembered him in the uniform of one sport or another. The woman with us noticed him first. "Who is that? That's—that's . . . Is that John Lindsay?" she asked. "No," I said. "My God. You know who that is? It's Swede Levov." I told my friends, "That's the Swede!"

A skinny, fair-haired boy of about seven or eight was walking alongside the Swede, a kid under a Mets cap pounding away at a first baseman's mitt that dangled, as had the Swede's, from his left hand. The two, clearly a father and his son, were laughing about something together when I approached and introduced myself. "I knew your brother at Weequahic."

"You're Zuckerman?" he replied, vigorously shaking my hand. "The author?"

"I'm Zuckerman the author."

"Sure, you were Jerry's great pal."

"I don't think Jerry had great pals. He was too brilliant for pals. He just used to beat my pants off at Ping-Pong down in your basement. Beating me at Ping-Pong was very important to Jerry."

"So you're the guy. My mother says, 'And he was such a nice, quiet child when he came to the house.' You know who this is?" the Swede said to the boy. "The guy who wrote those books. Nathan Zuckerman."

Mystified, the boy shrugged and muttered, "Hi."

"This is my son Chris."

"These are friends," I said, sweeping an arm out to introduce the three people with me. "And this man," I said to them, "is the greatest athlete in the history of Weequahic High. A real artist in three sports. Played first base like Hernandez—thinking. A line-drive doubles hitter. Do you know that?" I said to his son. "Your dad was our Hernandez."

"Hernandez's a lefty," he replied.

"Well, that's the only difference," I said to the little literalist, and put out my hand again to his father. "Nice to see you, Swede."

"You bet. Take it easy, Skip."

"Remember me to your brother," I said.

He laughed, we parted, and someone was saying to me, "Well, well, the greatest athlete in the history of Weequahic High called you 'Skip.'"

"I know. I can't believe it." And I did feel almost as wonderfully singled out as I had the one time before, at the age of ten, when the Swede had got so personal as to recognize me by the playground nickname I'd acquired because of two grades I skipped in grade school.

Midway through the first inning, the woman with us turned to me and said, "You should have seen your face—you might as well have told us he was Zeus. I saw just what you looked like as a boy."

The following letter reached me by way of my publisher a couple of weeks before Memorial Day, 1995.

Dear Skip Zuckerman:

I apologize for any inconvenience this letter may cause you. You may not remember our meeting at Shea Stadium. I was with my oldest son (now a first-year college student) and you were out with some friends to see the Mets. That was ten years ago, the era of Carter-Gooden-Hernandez, when you could still watch the Mets. You can't anymore.

I am writing to ask if we might meet sometime to talk. I'd be delighted to take you to dinner in New York if you would permit me.

I'm taking the liberty of proposing a meeting because of something I have been thinking about since my father died last year. He was ninety-six. He was his feisty, combative self right down to the end. That made it all the harder to see him go, despite his advanced age.

I would like to talk about him and his life. I have been trying to write a tribute to him, to be published privately for friends, family, and business associates. Most everybody thought of my father as indestructible, a thick-skinned man on a short fuse. That was far from the truth. Not everyone

knew how much he suffered because of the shocks that befell his loved ones.

Please be assured that I will understand if you haven't time to respond.

Sincerely,

Seymour "Swede" Levov, WHS 1945

Had anyone else asked if he could talk to me about a tribute he was writing to his father, I would have wished him luck and kept my nose out of it. But there were compelling reasons for my getting off a note to the Swede—within the hour—to say that I was at his disposal. The first was *Swede Levov wants to meet me*. Ridiculously, perhaps, at the onset of old age, I had only to see his signature at the foot of the letter to be swamped by memories of him, both on and off the field, that were some fifty years old and yet still captivating. I remembered going up every day to the playing field to watch football practice the year that the Swede first agreed to join the team. He was already a high-scoring hook-shot artist on the basketball court, but no one knew he could be just as magical on the football field until the coach pressed him into duty as an end and our losing team, though still at the bottom of the city league, was putting up one, two, even three touchdowns a game, all scored on passes to the Swede. Fifty or sixty kids gathered along the sidelines at practice to watch the Swede—in a battered leather helmet and the brown jersey numbered, in orange, 11—working out with the varsity against the JVs. The varsity quarterback, Lefty Leventhal, ran pass play after pass play ("Lev-en-thal to Le-vov! Lev-en-thal to Le-vov!" was an anapest that could always get us going back in the heyday of the Swede), and the task of the JV squad, playing defense, was to stop Swede Levov from scoring every time. I'm over sixty, not exactly someone with the outlook on life that he'd had as a boy, and yet the boy's beguilement has never wholly evaporated, for to this day I haven't forgotten the Swede, after being smothered by tacklers, climbing slowly to his feet, shaking himself off, casting an upward, remonstrative glance at the darkening fall sky, sighing rue-

fully, and then trotting undamaged back to the huddle. When he scored, that was one kind of glory, and when he got tackled and piled on hard, and just stood up and shook it off, that was another kind of glory, even in a scrimmage.

And then one day I shared in that glory. I was ten, never before touched by greatness, and would have been as beneath the Swede's attention as anyone else along the sidelines had it not been for Jerry Levov. Jerry had recently taken me on board as a friend; though I was hard put to believe it, the Swede must have noticed me around their house. And so late on a fall afternoon in 1943, when he got slammed to the ground by the whole of the JV team after catching a short Leventhal bullet and the coach abruptly blew the whistle signaling that was it for the day, the Swede, tentatively flexing an elbow while half running and half limping off the field, spotted me among the other kids, and called over, "Basketball was never like this, Skip."

The god (himself all of sixteen) had carried me up into athletes' heaven. The adored had acknowledged the adoring. Of course, with athletes as with movie idols, each worshiper imagines that he or she has a secret, personal link, but this was one forged openly by the most unostentatious of stars and before a hushed congregation of competitive kids—an amazing experience, and I was thrilled. I blushed, I was thrilled, I probably thought of nothing else for the rest of the week. The mock jock self-pity, the manly generosity, the princely graciousness, the athlete's self-pleasure so abundant that a portion can be freely given to the crowd—this munificence not only overwhelmed me and wafted through me because it had come wrapped in my nickname but became fixed in my mind as an embodiment of something grander even than his talent for sports: the talent for "being himself," the capacity to be this strange engulfing force and yet to have a voice and a smile unsullied by even a flicker of superiority—the natural modesty of someone for whom there were no obstacles, who appeared never to have to struggle to clear a space for himself. I don't imagine I'm the only grown man who was a Jewish kid aspiring to be an all-American kid during

the patriotic war years—when our entire neighborhood's wartime hope seemed to converge in the marvelous body of the Swede—who's carried with him through life recollections of this gifted boy's unsurpassable style.

The Jewishness that he wore so lightly as one of the tall, blond athletic winners must have spoken to us too—in our idolizing the Swede and his unconscious oneness with America, I suppose there was a tinge of shame and self-rejection. Conflicting Jewish desires awakened by the sight of him were simultaneously becalmed by him; the contradiction in Jews who want to fit in and want to stand out, who insist they are different and insist they are no different, resolved itself in the triumphant spectacle of this Swede who was actually only another of our neighborhood Seymours whose forebears had been Solomons and Sauls and who would themselves beget Stephens who would in turn beget Shawns. Where was the Jew in him? You couldn't find it and yet you knew it was there. Where was the irrationality in him? Where was the crybaby in him? Where were the wayward temptations? No guile. No artifice. No mischief. All that he had eliminated to achieve his perfection. No striving, no ambivalence, no doubleness—just the style, the natural physical refinement of a star.

Only . . . what did he do for subjectivity? What *was* the Swede's subjectivity? There had to be a substratum, but its composition was unimaginable.

That was the second reason I answered his letter—the substratum. What sort of mental existence had been his? What, if anything, had ever threatened to destabilize the Swede's trajectory? No one gets through unmarked by brooding, grief, confusion, and loss. Even those who had it all as kids sooner or later get the average share of misery, if not sometimes more. There had to have been consciousness and there had to have been blight. Yet I could not picture the form taken by either, could not desimplify him even now: in the residuum of adolescent imagination I was still convinced that for the Swede it had to have been pain-free all the way.

But what had he been alluding to in that careful, courteous letter

when, speaking of the late father, a man not as thick-skinned as people thought, he wrote, "Not everyone knew how much he suffered because of the shocks that befell his loved ones"? No, the Swede had suffered a shock. And it was suffering the shock that he wanted to talk about. It wasn't the father's life, it was his own that he wanted revealed.

I was wrong.

We met at an Italian restaurant in the West Forties where the Swede had for years been taking his family whenever they came over to New York for a Broadway show or to watch the Knicks at the Garden, and I understood right off that I wasn't going to get anywhere near the substratum. Everybody at Vincent's knew him by name—Vincent himself, Vincent's wife, Louie the maitre d', Carlo the bartender, Billy our waiter, everybody knew Mr. Levov and everybody asked after the missus and the boys. It turned out that when his parents were alive he used to bring them to celebrate an anniversary or a birthday at Vincent's. No, I thought, he's invited me here to reveal only that he is as admired on West 49th Street as he was on Chancellor Avenue.

Vincent's is one of those oldish Italian restaurants tucked into the midtown West Side streets between Madison Square Garden and the Plaza, small restaurants three tables wide and four chandeliers deep, with decor and menus that have changed hardly at all since before arugula was discovered. There was a ballgame on the TV set by the small bar, and a customer every once in a while would get up, go look for a minute, ask the bartender the score, ask how Mattingly was doing, and head back to his meal. The chairs were upholstered in electric-turquoise plastic, the floor was tiled in speckled salmon, one wall was mirrored, the chandeliers were fake brass, and for decoration there was a five-foot-tall bright red pepper grinder standing in one corner like a Giacometti (a gift, said the Swede, to Vincent from his hometown in Italy); counterbalancing it in the opposite corner, on a stand like statuary, stood a stout jeroboam of Barolo. A table piled with jars of Vincent's Marinara

Sauce was just across from the bowl of free after-dinner mints beside Mrs. Vincent's register; on the dessert cart was the napoleon, the tiramisù, the layer cake, the apple tart, and the sugared strawberries; and behind our table, on the wall, were the autographed photographs ("Best regards to Vincent and Anne") of Sammy Davis, Jr., Joe Namath, Liza Minelli, Kaye Ballard, Gene Kelly, Jack Carter, Phil Rizzuto, and Johnny and Joanna Carson. There should have been one of the Swede, of course, and there would have been if we were still fighting the Germans and the Japanese and across the street were Weequahic High.

Our waiter, Billy, a small, heavysset bald man with a boxer's flattened nose, didn't have to ask what the Swede wanted to eat. For over thirty years the Swede had been ordering from Billy the house specialty, ziti à la Vincent, preceded by clams posillipo. "Best baked ziti in New York," the Swede told me, but I ordered my own old-fashioned favorite, the chicken cacciatore, "off the bone" at Billy's suggestion. While writing up our order, Billy told the Swede that Tony Bennett had been in the evening before. For a man with Billy's compact build, a man you might have imagined lugging around a weightier burden all his life than a plate of ziti, Billy's voice—high-pitched and intense, taut from some distress too long endured—was unexpected and a real treat. "See where your friend is sitting? See his chair, Mr. Levov? Tony Bennett sat in that chair." To me he said, "You know what Tony Bennett says when people come up to his table and introduce themselves to him? He says, 'Nice to see you.' And you're in his seat."

That ended the entertainment. It was work from there on out.

He had brought photographs of his three boys to show me, and from the appetizer through to dessert virtually all conversation was about eighteen-year-old Chris, sixteen-year-old Steve, and fourteen-year-old Kent. Which boy was better at lacrosse than at baseball but was being pressured by a coach . . . which was as good at soccer as at football but couldn't decide . . . which was the diving champion who had also broken school records in butterfly and

backstroke. All three were hardworking students, A's and B's; one was "into" the sciences, another was more "community-minded," while the third . . . etc. There was one photograph of the boys with their mother, a good-looking fortyish blonde, advertising manager for a Morris County weekly. But she hadn't begun her career, the Swede was quick to add, until their youngest had entered second grade. The boys were lucky to have a mom who still put staying at home and raising kids ahead of . . .

I was impressed, as the meal wore on, by how assured he seemed of everything commonplace he said, and how everything he said was suffused by his good nature. I kept waiting for him to lay bare something more than this pointed unobjectionableness, but all that rose to the surface was more surface. What he has instead of a being, I thought, is blandness—the guy's radiant with it. He has devised for himself an incognito, and the incognito has become him. Several times during the meal I didn't think I was going to make it, didn't think I'd get to dessert if he was going to keep praising his family and praising his family . . . until I began to wonder if it wasn't that he was incognito but that he was mad.

Something was on top of him that had called a halt to him. Something had turned him into a human platitude. Something had warned him: You must not run counter to anything.

The Swede, some six or seven years my senior, was close to seventy, and yet he was no less splendid-looking for the crevices at the corners of his eyes and, beneath the promontory of cheekbones, a little more hollowing out than classic standards of ruggedness required. I chalked up the gauntness to a regimen of serious jogging or tennis, until near the end of the meal I found out that he'd had prostate surgery during the winter and was only beginning to regain the weight he'd lost. I don't know if it was learning that he'd suffered an affliction or his confessing to one that most surprised me. I even wondered if it might not be his recent experience of the surgery and its aftereffects that was feeding my sense of someone who was not mentally sound.

At one point I interrupted and, trying not to appear in any way