



The breast.

Roth, Philip.

*by the same author*

GOODBYE, COLUMBUS  
LETTING GO  
WHEN SHE WAS GOOD  
PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT  
OUR GANG

# THE BREAST

## PHILIP ROTH

JONATHAN CAPE  
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To *Elizabeth Ames*, executive director  
of Yaddo from 1924 to 1970,  
and to *The Corporation of Yaddo*,  
Saratoga Springs, New York,  
the best friends a writer could have

## THE BREAST

**I**t began oddly. But could it have begun otherwise, however it began? It has been said, of course, that everything under the sun begins “oddly” and ends “oddly” and is “odd”: a perfect rose is “odd,” so is an imperfect rose, so is the rose of ordinary rosy good looks growing in your neighbor’s garden. I know about the perspective from which everything appears awesome and mysterious. Reflect upon eternity, consider, if you are up to it, oblivion, and everything that is is a wonder. Still and all I would submit to you, in all humility, that some things are more wondrous than others, and I am one such thing.

It began oddly, then, with a mild, sporadic tingling in the groin. During that first week I would retire several times a day to the men’s room adjacent to my office in the humanities building to take down my trousers, but upon examining myself, saw nothing out of the ordinary, assiduous as was my search. I

decided reluctantly, half-heartedly (and not really) to ignore it. I had been so devout a hypochondriac all my life, so alert to every change in body temperature and systemic regularity, that it had long ago become impossible for the reasonable man that I also happened to be, to take seriously the telltale symptoms that I found on myself almost weekly, invariably signs of grave and incurable disease. Despite the grim premonitions of extinction, or paralysis, or unendurable pain that would accompany each new ache or fever, I had after all to admit that I had made it to thirty-eight without any history of major illness; I was a man of hearty bowel movements, dependable sexual potency, of stamina and appetite, a man six feet tall with good posture and a trim physique, most of his hair and all of his teeth. Consequently, though I might, in self-dramatizing hypochondriacal fashion, identify this tingling in my groin with some nervous disease on the order of shingles—only worse—I simultaneously realized that it was undoubtedly, as always, nothing.

I was wrong. It was something. Another week passed before I was able to discern a pinkening of the skin just barely perceptible beneath my corkscrewed black pubic curls; the discoloration was so faint, however, that I believed I had to be imagining things. Another week again—making, for the record, an “incubation” period of twenty-one days—before I looked down at myself one evening upon stepping into the

shower and discovered that somehow through that long hectic day of teaching and conferences and commuting and dining out, the flesh at the base of my penis had turned a soft reddish shade. I looked stained, as though a small raspberry, or maybe a cherry, had been crushed against my pubes, the juices running down onto my member, coloring the root of it raggedly but unmistakably *red*. Dye, I decided in the next instant, from my undershorts (that the undershorts I had worn that day had been a pale blue and lay at my feet meant nothing in that rush of panic-stricken disbelief). In the shower I lathered and rinsed my penis and my pubic hair three times over, then coated myself from the thighs to the navel with a deep icing of soap bubbles; when I rinsed with hot water—uncomfortably hot this time—the stain was still there. Not a rash, not a scab, not a bruise or a sore, but a deep pigment change such as I associated at once with cancer.

I immediately telephoned my physician at his home. Dr. Gordon is a meticulous and conscientious man, and despite my attempt to hide my alarm he heard the fear in my voice and volunteered to dress and come across town to my apartment to examine me. It was just midnight, according to the magically/minded the time at which transformations take place, and a hard hour to get a doctor out in New York City. Perhaps if Claire had been with me that night, instead of back at her own apartment preparing some sort of

committee report, I would have had the courage of my fear and told the doctor to come running. Of course it is unlikely that on the basis of my symptoms at that hour, Dr. Gordon would have decided to admit me to a hospital, nor would it appear from what we now know—or continue not to know—that once I was into a hospital, anything could have been done to prevent or arrest the disaster. The pain and the terror of the next four hours could perhaps have been alleviated by morphine, but nothing indicates that the process itself could have been reversed by any medical procedure short of euthanasia.

With Claire at my side, then, I might have been able to cave in completely, but alone I suddenly felt ashamed and unmanned by the way I had lost control of myself; it was no more than three minutes since I'd spotted the stain, and there I was, wet and nude on my leather sofa, trying vainly to overcome the tremolo in my voice as I looked down at my penis and gave the doctor a description of what I saw. *Take hold*, I thought—and so I took hold, as I can when I tell myself to. I said that if it was what I feared in the first startling moment, it could wait until morning; and if it wasn't it could also wait. I would be fine. I was exhausted from a hard day, I had just been—shocked. I would see him in his office at—I thought this brave of me—about noon. Nine, he said. I agreed and said, evenly as I could, "Good night."

//On the phone I had recounted to the doctor the his-

tory of the tingling sensation in the groin, and had described my discolored penis with what I hoped would sound something like "medical" objectivity. I had not mentioned a third symptom, because until I hung up I had not associated it with my "condition." That was the dramatic increase in local sensation that I had experienced while making love to Claire during the preceding three weeks. I had so far associated it with a resurgence of my desire for her. From where and why I could not say—to me she was no more nor less voluptuous and lovely a young woman than she had always been—but I was delighted to have it back again. As it was, the strong lust that her physical beauty had aroused in me during the first two years of our affair had been steadily on the wane for a year now until, lately, I had come to make love to her two, maybe three times a month, and then, as often as not, at her provocation.

My cooling down, my coldness, had been distressing to both of us, but as we have both endured considerable emotional upheaval and psychic disorientation in our lives (she as a child with bitterly antagonistic and acrimonious parents, I with an enraged wife), we were equally reluctant to take any steps towards dissolving our union because of it. Dispiriting as it surely was for a handsome young woman of twenty-five to be spurned in bed night after night, Claire displayed outwardly little of the suspiciousness or frustration or distress or anger that would have seemed, even to me

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who was the source of her unhappiness, justified in the circumstances. Yes, she pays a price for this "equanimity"—she is not the most expressive woman I have ever known, for all her passion in sex—but I have reached the stage in my life—that is to say, I *had*—where the calm harbor and its clear, placid waters was more to my liking than the foaming drama of the high seas. Where once I had been beguiled by spontaneity and temperament, now I found my comfort with the even-tempered and the predictable. If sometimes the unruffleable in Claire made her less responsive and various in conversation, or in company, than I would have liked her to be, I was really much too content with her dependable sobriety to be too peeved with her for lacking color. I had had enough "color," thank you: six years of it.

What so distressed *me* about my waning desire was that over the course of our three years, Claire and I had worked out a way of living together—which in part involved living separately—that provided us with the warmth and security of one another's affection and company, without the accompanying burden of dependence, or the grinding boredom, or the wild, unfocused yearning, or the round-the-clock strategies of deception, placation, and dominance that seemed to have soured all but a very few of the marriages we knew of. By virtue of her unhappy childhood Claire was as hard-headed and undeluded about marriage as I was by virtue of my own unfortunate encounter

with it—singular as my experience may have been, it had nonetheless produced in me a monumental capacity for abstinence, and I swore that I would never touch the stuff again. Besides, nobody really seemed to have an arrangement as commonsensical and as gratifying as ours; we really did get on so easily and with so little strain, we liked each other so much, that it seemed to me something very like a disaster (little I knew about disaster) when, out of the blue, I began to find our love-making boring and pleasureless. A year earlier I had terminated five years of psychoanalysis with the conviction that the wounds sustained in that Grand Guignol marriage (and in the lacerating divorce) had healed over as well as they ever would; I wasn't the man I once had been, but I wasn't a bleeding buck private any longer either, my skull wrapped in bandages and beating the drum of self-pity as I limped tearfully into the analyst's office from that battlefield known as Hearth and Home. With Claire life had become orderly and stable—the first time I could say that about my life in more than a decade; I felt grounded, dug in, and permanent about myself as I hadn't since I'd been a senior in college and knew for a fact that I was a serious and intelligent person. Only now, in the midst of my plenty, there was this diminishing of desire for the very woman who had helped so to fashion my new life of contentment. It was a depressing, bewildering development, and try as I might, I seemed unable to

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alter it. Finally I just did not care at all about touching her or being touched. I was, in fact, scheduled to pay a visit to my former analyst to discuss with him this loss of sexual appetite for Claire when, *out of the blue again*, I was suddenly more passionate than I had ever been before with her or with anyone.

Perhaps passion isn't the right word: say, more susceptible to immediate sensual delight, purely tactile pleasure. Sex, not in the head, not in the heart, but excruciatingly in the epidermis of the penis, sex skin deep and ecstatic. In bed I found myself writhing with pleasure, clawing at the sheets and twisting my head and shoulders in a way I had previously associated more with women than with men, and women more imaginary than real. Those times I felt I simply could not endure these sensations any longer, I nearly *cried* from the pleasure, and when I came I took Claire's ear in my mouth and licked it like a dog. I licked her hair. I found myself, panting, licking my own shoulder. During the final week of my incubation period, I was on her like an animal in perpetual heat. Having lain indifferently beside her for nearly a year, I was entering now upon some new compensatory phase of erotic susceptibility and fleshly release akin to nothing I had ever known—or so I reasoned. "Is this what is meant by debauchery?" I asked my happy friend whose pale skin bore the marks of my teeth. She only smiled. Her hair was stringy from perspiration, like a little girl who's

played too long out in the heat. Pleasure-giving Claire.

Alas, what has happened to me is like nothing anyone has ever known: beyond understanding, beyond compassion, beyond comedy, though there are those, I know, who claim to be on the brink of some conclusive scientific explanation; and those, my faithful visitors, whose compassion is deeply felt, sorrowful and kind; and there are still others—there would have to be—out in the world who cannot help but laugh. And I, at times, am one with them: I understand, I have compassion, I see the joke. If only I could sustain the laughter for more than a few seconds, however—if only it wasn't so brief and so bitter. But maybe that is what I have to look forward to, if the medical men are able to sustain life in me in this condition, and if I should continue to want them to.

I am a breast. A phenomenon that has been variously described to me as "a massive hormonal influx," "an endocrinopathic catastrophe," and/or "a hermaphroditic explosion of chromosomes" took place within my body between midnight and four A.M. on February 18, 1971, and converted me into a mammary gland disconnected from any human form, a mammary gland such as could only appear, one would have thought, in a dream or a Dali painting. They tell me that I am now an organism with the general shape of a football, or a dirigible; I am said to be of a spongy consistency, weighing in at one hundred and fifty-five pounds (formerly I was one hundred and sixty-two), and measuring, still, six feet in length. Though I continue to retain, in damaged and "irregular" form, much of the cardiovascular and central nervous systems, an excretory system described as "reduced and primitive"—tubes now help me to void—and a respiratory sys-

tem that terminates just above my midsection in something resembling a navel with a flap, the basic architecture in which these human characteristics are disarranged and buried is that of the breast of the mammalian female.

The bulk of my weight is fatty tissue. At one of my ends I am rounded off like a watermelon; at the other I terminate in a nipple, cylindrical in shape, projecting five inches from my "body," and perforated at the tip with seventeen openings, each about half the size of the male urethral orifice. I am told that these are the apertures of the lactiferous ducts. As I am able to understand it without the benefit of diagrams—I am sightless—the ducts branch back into lobules composed of cells of the sort that secrete the milk that is carried to the surface of the ordinary nipple when it is being suckled, or milked by mechanical means.

My flesh is smooth and "youthful" and I am still a "Caucasian," they say. My nipple is rosy pink in color. This last is thought to be unusual in that in my former incarnation I was an emphatic brunette. As I told the endocrinologist who made this observation, I myself find it less "unusual" than certain other aspects of the transformation, but then I am not the endocrinologist around here. The wit was bitter, but it was wit at last, and it must have been observed and noted that I was making an "adjustment" to my new situation.

My nipple is rosy pink in color—as was the stain

I had discovered at the base of my penis upon stepping into the shower the night this all happened to me. In that the apertures in the nipple provide me with something remotely like a mouth and ears—at least I am able to make myself understood through my nipple, and, faintly, to hear what is going on around me—I myself had assumed at first that it was my head that had become my nipple. The doctors, however, hypothesize otherwise, at least as of this month. With little more evidence, I would think, to support this conjecture over any other, they now maintain that the wrinkled, roughened skin of the nipple—which, admittedly, is exquisitely sensitive to touch like no tissue on the face, including the mucous membrane of the lips—was formed out of the glans penis. So too the puckered pinkish areola that encircles the nipple and contains the muscle system that stiffens the nipple when I am aroused, is said to have metamorphosed from the shaft of the penis under the assault (some say) of a volcanic secretion from the pituitary of “mammogenic” fluid. Two fine long reddish hairs extend from one of the small elevations on the rim of my areola. “They must look strange. How long are they?”

“Seven inches exactly.”

“My antennae.” The bitterness. Then the disbelief. “Will you pull on one of them, please?”

“If you like, David, I’ll pull gently.”

Dr. Gordon wasn’t lying. A hair on my body had

been tugged. It was a familiar sensation, and it made me want to be dead.

Of course it was days after the change had taken place before I even regained consciousness, and another week before they would tell me anything other than that I had been “very ill” with “an endocrine imbalance,” and even then, I howled so wretchedly to rediscover each time I awoke that I could neither see, smell, taste, or move, that I had to be kept under heavy sedation. When my “body” was touched I did not know what to make of it. The sensation was, unexpectedly, soothing and pleasant, but of an undifferentiated kind, reminding me of water lapping over the skin more than anything else. One morning I awakened to feel something strange happening to one of my extremities. Nothing like pain, yet I screamed, “I’ve been burned! I was in a fire!”

“Calm down now, Mr. Kepesh,” a woman said. “I’m only washing you. I’m only washing your face.”

“My face? *Where* is my face! Where are my arms! My legs! Where is my mouth! What happened to me!”

Now Dr. Gordon spoke. “You’re in Lenox Hill Hospital, David. You’re in a private room on the seventh floor. You’ve been here ten days. I’ve been to see you every day in the morning and again at night. You are getting excellent care and continual attention. Right now you’re just being washed with a sponge and some warm soapy water. That’s all. Does that hurt you?”

"No," I whimpered, "but where's my face . . .?"

"Just let the nurse wash you, and we'll talk a little later in the morning, if you're up to it. You just get all the rest you can."

"What happened to me?" All I could remember of the night in my apartment was the pain and the terror: to me it had felt as though I was being fired over and over again from a cannon into a brick wall, and then stomped on by an army of boots. In actuality it was more as though I had been a man made of taffy, stretched in opposite directions by my penis and my buttocks until I was as wide as I had once been long. The doctors believe that I could not have been conscious for more than a minute or two once the "explosion" or "catastrophe" had gotten underway, but it seems to me in retrospect that I had been awake to feel every single bone in my body broken in two and then hammered or trampled into dust.

"If you'll only relax now, David, just relax—"

"How am I being fed!"

"Intravenously. You're being fed all you need."

"Where are my arms!"

"Just let the nurse wash you, and then she'll rub some oil on you, and you'll feel much better. Then you can sleep."

I was washed like this every morning, but it must have been another week or more before I was sufficiently calm to associate the sensations accompanying the washing with the pleasures of erotic stimulation. By

now I had concluded that I was a quadruple amputee. I imagined that the boiler had exploded beneath the bedroom of my parlor floor apartment, and that I had been blinded and mutilated in the explosion. I sobbed almost continuously, giving no credence whatsoever to the ~~hormonal~~ explanations Dr. Gordon and his colleagues continued to offer for my "illness." Then one morning, depleted and numb from my days of tearless weeping, I felt myself becoming aroused. There was a mild throbbing sensation in the vicinity of what I took still to be my "face," a pleasing feeling of—of engorgement. I was being washed.

"Do you like that?" The voice was a man's! A stranger's!

"Who are you? Where am I?"

"I'm the nurse."

"Where's the other nurse?"

"It's Sunday. Take it easy, Dave, it's only Sunday."

The next morning the regular nurse returned to duty, accompanied by Dr. Gordon. Once again as my "face" was washed I began to feel the sort of sensations that accompany erotic play, but this time I permitted them to envelop me. When she began to rub me with oil, I whispered, "That feels nice."

"What?" asked Dr. Gordon.

I could now feel each of her fingers touching me; then something was moving on me in slow, easy circles. The soft palm of her hand.

"Oh, oh," I cried, as that exquisite sense of immi-

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nence that precedes a perfect ejaculation pervaded my whole being, "oh that does feel so good!" And then I began to sob uncontrollably and had eventually to be put to sleep.

Shortly thereafter, Dr. Gordon, accompanied by Dr. Klinger, who had for five years been my psychoanalyst, told me what it is I have become.

I was washed gently but thoroughly every morning and then my nipple and ~~areola~~ were lubricated with oil. Six days a week these ablutions were performed by a woman, Miss Clark, and on Sunday by the man. It was ten weeks more before I had sufficiently recovered from the horror of hearing the truth about myself to be able to relax again beneath Miss Clark's ministering hands. As it turned out, I found that I could never submit wholly to the sexual frenzy caused by the oiling of my nipple, until Dr. Gordon had consented to leave me alone in the room with the nurse. But then the sensations were almost more than could be borne, deliciously "almost"—akin to what I had experienced in those final weeks of intercourse with Claire, but more intense, it seemed, for coming to me in a state of complete helplessness, in utter darkness, and from a source unknown to me, seemingly immense and dedicated solely to me and my pleasure. By now I had been belted with a soft harness into a contraption like a hammock—my nipple at the head, my rounded end at the foot of the sling-like affair—and after Miss Clark had retired from my room with

the basin of warm water and the ~~vials of oil~~ (I imagined vials, not bottles), my writhing would cause the hammock to sway to and fro for long, glorious minutes on end. It was swaying still when my nipple softened and I drifted off to sleep the sleep of the sated.

I say the doctor consented to leave the room. But how would I know if anyone ever left the room? It makes most sense to conclude that actually I am under continuous observation, if not by a team of scientific observers right here with me (with me in an amphitheater perhaps?), then on closed-circuit television. Dr. Gordon assures me that I am under no more surveillance than any other "difficult case," but who or what is to prevent him from deceiving me? My father? Claire? Dr. Klinger? Who could possibly be so silly as to be watching out for my civil liberties in the midst of a calamity like this? That is laughable. And why should I, in this state, care one way or the other if I am not alone when I think myself alone? For all I know I may be under a soundproof glass dome on a platform in the middle of Madison Square Garden, or in Macy's window—and what difference would it make? Wherever they have put me, whoever may be looking down upon me, I am really quite as alone as anyone could ever wish to be. Probably it would be best to leave off thinking too much about my "dignity," regardless of what it meant to me back when I was a professor of literature, a lover, a son, a friend, a neighbor, a customer, a client, and a citizen.

One might think that one consequence of such a transformation would be that the victim could cease for the time being to bother himself with matters of propriety and decorum and personal pride. But, as they are intimately connected to my idea of sanity and to my self-esteem, I am actually "bothered" as I wasn't in my former life, where the social constraint practiced by and large by the educated classes provided me with genuine aesthetic and ethical satisfactions. If I had become somewhat formal, even reserved, in the world-at-large at the age of thirty-eight, I do not think I was any the less unguarded or intimate with my closest friends because of it; but now, the thought that my sexual frenzy is being carried "live" on television, the thought that when I "masturbate" I am being observed from a gallery by hundreds, is deeply disturbing and *wounding*. How petty, how "inhibited" of me in the circumstances, you may say; but then, my liberated friend, what do you know about the circumstances? So: when Dr. Gordon assures me that my "privacy" is being respected, I no longer contradict him. I say, "Thank you for your consideration." In this way I am able at least to pretend to them that I think I am alone even when I am not.

You see, it is not a matter of doing what is right or seemly; I am not concerned, I can assure you, with the etiquette of being a breast. It is rather doing what I would do if I would continue to be me. And I would, for if not me, who? what? Either I continue to be

myself, or I will go mad, and then I will surely die. And it would seem that I do not wish to die; it surprises me some too, but it continues to be so. I don't foresee a miracle, some sort of retaliatory raid by my *anti-mammogenic* hormones, if such there be (and God only knows if there are in someone made like me), that will restore me to my previous physical proportions; I suspect it's a little late for that, and so it is not with such hope beating eternally in the breast that the breast continues to want to exist. Human I insist I am, but not that human. And it isn't that I am willing to live now because I am able, because the worst is over; I'm not at all sure that's the case. For all my "equilibrium" and the seeming "objectivity" that permits me to narrate the history of my disaster, I sometimes think the worst is yet to come. It is this then: having been terrified of death since I was two, I have become entrenched in my hatred of it, have taken a position *against* death from which I cannot retreat just because This has happened to me. Horrible as This is, my oldest and most heartless enemy, Extinction, still strikes me as even worse. Then, you will say, maybe *This* is not so horrible after all. Well, reader, you say that, if you want to. All I know is that I have been wanting not to die for so long, that I just can't stop doing it overnight.

That I haven't died is a matter of great interest to medical science, as you can imagine; *that* miracle continues to be studied, I am told, by microbiologists,

physiologists, biochemists, etc., all of them working in "teams" here in the hospital and in medical institutions around the country; they are trying to figure out why I keep ticking. Dr. Klinger thinks that no matter how they put the puzzle together, in the end it may all come down to those old pulpit bromides, "strength of character" and "the will to live." So says my latter-day minister, and who am I not to concur in such a heroic estimate of myself?

"It would appear," I tell Dr. Klinger, "that my analysis has 'taken'; a tribute to you, sir." He chuckles. "You were always stronger than you thought." "I would as soon never have had to find out. And besides, it's not so. I can't live like this any longer." "Yet you have, you do." "I do *but I can't*. I was never 'strong.' Only determined. One foot in front of the other. Punctuality. Honesty. Courtesy. Good grades in all subjects. It goes back to handing my homework in on time and carrying off the prizes. Dr. Klinger, *it's hideous in here*. I want to quit, I want to go crazy, to go spinning off, ranting and wild, *but I can't*. I sob. I scream. I touch bottom. I lay there on that bottom! But then I come around. I make jokes, a little bitter and quite lame. I listen to the radio. I listen to the phonograph. I think about what we've said. I restrain my rage and restrain my rage and I wait for you to come again. But this is madness, this coming around. To be putting one foot in front of the other is madness *in that I have no feet!* A ghastly catastrophe has befallen me and I listen

to the six o'clock news! I listen to the weather!" No, no, says Dr. Klinger: strength of character, the will to live.

For all that I announce at intervals that I want to go mad, it is apparently impossible: beyond me, *beneath* me. It took This for me to learn that I am a citadel of sanity.

So, though I pretend otherwise, I know they are studying me, watching me as they would watch from a glass-bottomed boat the private life of the porpoise or the whale. I think of these aquatic mammals because of the over-all resemblance I now bear to them in size and shape, and because the porpoise in particular is said to be an intelligent, perhaps even a rational, creature. I am a kind of porpoise, I tell myself, for whatever profound or whimsical reason. A beached whale. Jonah *in* the whale. "Fish out of water will do" —one of those jokes I am unable to suppress . . . In the midst of the incredible, the irredeemably ordinary appears to remind me of the level at which most of one's life is usually lived. Really, it is the silliness, the triviality, the *meaninglessness* of experience that one misses most in a state like this; for aside from the monstrous physical fact, there is of course the intellectual responsibility I seem to have developed to the uniqueness and enormity of my misfortune. WHAT DOES IT MEAN? HOW HAS IT COME TO PASS? AND WHY? IN THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF THE HUMAN RACE, WHY DAVID ALAN KEPESH? It is a

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measure of Dr. Klinger's skill, I think, that he speaks to me of "strength of character" and "the will to live," or as I refer to them in our meetings, s. of c., and the w. to l. These banal phrases are the therapeutic equivalent of my lame jokes. In these, my preposterous times, we must keep to what is ordinary and familiar; better the banal than the apocalyptic—for after all is said and done, citadel of sanity though I may be, we both recognize that there is just so much even I can take.

As far as I know, my only visitors other than scientists, doctors, and hospital staff have been Claire, my father, and Arthur Schonbrunn, formerly my department chairman and now the Dean of the College. My father's bravery has been staggering. I do not know how to account for it, except to say that I simply never knew the man. *Nobody* knew the man. Hard-working, cunning, even tyrannical—this I did know from observing him all those years at his work; with us, his little family, he had been short-tempered, demanding, innocent, protective, tender, and deeply in love. But this self-possession in the face of horror, this composure in the face of the monstrous, who could have expected such a response from one whose life had been given over to running a second-class hotel in South Fallsburg, New York? A short order cook to begin with, he rose eventually to be the innkeeper himself; now retired, he "kills time" answering the phone

mornings at his brother's booming catering service in Bayside. He comes to visit me once a week and, seated in a chair that is drawn up close to my nipple, he recounts the current adventures of people who were our guests when I was a boy. Remember Abrams the milliner? Remember Cohen the chiropodist? Remember Rosenheim with the card tricks and the Cadillac? Yes, yes, yes, I think so. Well, this one is dying, this one has moved to California, this one has a son who has married an Egyptian. "How do you like that?" he says, "I didn't even know they would allow that over there." Oh, Dad, I think to say, wonders never cease . . . But I would not dream of making such a stupid crack to him: his performance is too awesome for that. Only is it a performance? I think: "This is my father who used to m.c. in the casino at night—all the solemnity with which he used to introduce those waiters singing "*Eli, Eli*." This is Abe Kepesh of Kepesh's Hungarian Royale South Fallsburg. What am I to make of this? Is he a god or is he a simpleton, or is he just numb? Or is there no choice for him but to talk to me as he always has? *Doesn't he get it? Doesn't he get what has happened?*

Then he leaves—without kissing me. Something new for my father and me. And that is when I realize all that this has cost him; that is when I realize that it is a performance, and that my father is a great and noble man.

And my excitable mother? Mercifully for her she is

dead; if she wasn't, this would have killed her. Or would it? How noble was *she*, that chambermaid and cook? She, who put up with alcoholic bakers and homicidal salad men and bus boys who still wet the bed, could she have put up with this too? *Beasts*, she called them, *barnyard animals*, but always she went back to the kettles, back to the mops and the linens, despite the *angst* she must endure from Memorial Day weekend to Yom Kippur because of the radical human imperfection of our help. Isn't it from my mother that I inherited my determination to begin with? Isn't it to her example that I owe my survival? *There's more banality for you: I am able to bear my transformation into a mammary gland because of my upbringing in a typically crisis-ridden Catskill hotel.*

Claire, whose imperturbability has from the first been such a tonic to me, a soothing antidote to my former wife, and I suppose even to my mother and those tantrums of hers I had witnessed back in the caves of boyhood, was not as able as my father had been at neutralizing her anguish right off. What astonished me weren't her tears, however, but the weight of her head on my midsection when, five minutes or so into her first visit, she broke down and began to sob. *How can she want to touch me? How can she put her face to me?* I had been expecting that I would never be handled again by anyone other than a doctor or a nurse or a medical technician. I thought: "If Claire had turned into an enormous