

Everyman

Philip Roth

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To J. C.

AROUND THE GRAVE in the rundown cemetery were a few of his former advertising colleagues from New York, who recalled his energy and originality and told his daughter, Nancy, what a pleasure it had been to work with him. There were also people who'd driven up from Starfish Beach, the residential retirement village at the Jersey Shore where he'd been living since Thanksgiving of 2001—the elderly to whom only recently he'd been giving art classes. And there were his two sons, Randy and Lonny, middle-aged men from his turbulent first marriage, very much their mother's children, who as a consequence knew little of him that was praiseworthy and much that was beastly and who were present out of duty and nothing more. His older brother, Howie, and his sister-in-law were there,

having flown in from California the night before, and there was one of his three ex-wives, the middle one, Nancy's mother, Phoebe, a tall, very thin white-haired woman whose right arm hung limply at her side. When asked by Nancy if she wanted to say anything, Phoebe shyly shook her head but then went ahead to speak in a soft voice, her speech faintly slurred. "It's just so hard to believe. I keep thinking of him swimming the bay—that's all. I just keep seeing him swimming the bay." And then Nancy, who had made her father's funeral arrangements and placed the phone calls to those who'd showed up so that the mourners wouldn't consist of just her mother, herself, and his brother and sister-in-law. There was only one person whose presence hadn't to do with having been invited, a heavyset woman with a pleasant round face and dyed red hair who had simply appeared at the cemetery and introduced herself as Maureen, the private duty nurse who had looked after him following his heart surgery years back. Howie remembered her and went up to kiss her cheek.

Nancy told everyone, "I can begin by saying something to you about this cemetery, because I've

discovered that my father's grandfather, my great-grandfather, is not only buried in the original few acres alongside my great-grandmother but was one of its founders in 1888. The association that first financed and erected the cemetery was composed of the burial societies of Jewish benevolent organizations and congregations scattered across Union and Essex counties. My great-grandfather owned and ran a boarding house in Elizabeth that catered especially to newly arrived immigrants, and he was concerned with their well-being as more than a mere landlord. That's why he was among the original members who purchased the open field that was here and who themselves graded and landscaped it, and why he served as the first cemetery chairman. He was relatively young then but in his full vigor, and it's his name alone that is signed to the document specifying that the cemetery was for 'burying deceased members in accordance with Jewish law and ritual.' As is all too obvious, the maintenance of individual plots and of the fencing and the gates is no longer what it should be. Things have rotted and toppled over, the gates are rusted, the locks are gone, there's been vandalism. By now the place has

become the butt end of the airport and what you're hearing from a few miles away is the steady din of the New Jersey Turnpike. Of course I thought first of the truly beautiful places where my father might be buried, the places where he and my mother used to swim together when they were young, and the places where he loved to swim at the shore. Yet despite the fact that looking around at the deterioration here breaks my heart—as it probably does yours, and perhaps even makes you wonder why we're assembled on grounds so badly scarred by time—I wanted him to lie close to those who loved him and from whom he descended. My father loved his parents and he should be near them. I didn't want him to be somewhere alone." She was silent for a moment to collect herself. A gentle-faced woman in her mid-thirties, plainly pretty as her mother had been, she looked all at once in no way authoritative or even brave but like a ten-year-old overwhelmed. Turning toward the coffin, she picked up a clod of dirt and, before dropping it onto the lid, said lightly, with the air still of a bewildered young girl, "Well, this is how it turns out. There's nothing more we can do, Dad." Then she remembered his own stoical maxim from decades back and began to cry.

"There's no remaking reality," she told him. "Just take it as it comes. Hold your ground and take it as it comes."

The next to throw dirt onto the lid of the coffin was Howie, who'd been the object of his worship when they were children and in return had always treated him with gentleness and affection, patiently teaching him to ride a bike and to swim and to play all the sports in which Howie himself excelled. It still appeared as if he could run a football through the middle of the line, and he was seventy-seven years old. He'd never been hospitalized for anything and, though a sibling bred of the same stock, had remained triumphantly healthy all his life.

His voice was husky with emotion when he whispered to his wife, "My kid brother. It makes no sense." Then he too addressed everyone. "Let's see if I can do it. Now let's get to this guy. About my brother . . ." He paused to compose his thoughts so that he could speak sensibly. His way of talking and the pleasant pitch of his voice were so like his brother's that Phoebe began to cry, and, quickly, Nancy took her by the arm. "His last few years," he said, gazing toward the grave, "he had health problems, and there was also loneliness—no less a problem.

We spoke on the phone whenever we could, though near the end of his life he cut himself off from me for reasons that were never clear. From the time he was in high school he had an irresistible urge to paint, and after he retired from advertising, where he'd made a considerable success first as an art director and then when he was promoted to be a creative director—after a life in advertising he painted practically every day of every year that was left to him. We can say of him what has doubtless been said by their loved ones about nearly everyone who is buried here: he should have lived longer. He should have indeed." Here, after a moment's silence, the resigned look of gloom on his face gave way to a sorrowful smile. "When I started high school and had team practice in the afternoons, he took over the errands that I used to run for my father after school. He loved being only nine years old and carrying the diamonds in an envelope in his jacket pocket onto the bus to Newark, where the setter and the sizer and the polisher and the watch repairman our father used each sat in a cubbyhole of his own, tucked away on Frelinghuysen Avenue. Those trips gave that kid enormous pleasure. I think watching these artisans doing their lonely work in

those tight little places gave him the idea for using his hands to make art. I think looking at the facets of the diamonds through my father's jewelry loupe is something else that fostered his desire to make art." A laugh suddenly got the upper hand with Howie, a little flurry of relief from his task, and he said, "I was the conventional brother. In me diamonds fostered a desire to make money." Then he resumed where he'd left off, looking through the large sunny window of their boyhood years. "Our father took a small ad in the *Elizabeth Journal* once a month. During the holiday season, between Thanksgiving and Christmas, he took the ad once a week. 'Trade in your old watch for a new one.' All these old watches that he accumulated—most of them beyond repair—were dumped in a drawer in the back of the store. My little brother could sit there for hours, spinning the hands and listening to the watches tick, if they still did, and studying what each face and what each case looked like. That's what made that *boy* tick. A hundred, two hundred trade-in watches, the entire drawerful probably worth no more than ten bucks, but to his budding artist's eye, that backroom watch drawer was a treasure chest. He used to take them and wear them—he always

had a watch that was out of that drawer. One of the ones that worked. And the ones he tried to make work, whose looks he liked, he'd fiddle around with but to no avail—generally he'd only make them worse. Still, that was the beginning of his using his hands to perform meticulous tasks. My father always had two girls just out of high school, in their late teens or early twenties, helping him behind the counter in the store. Nice, sweet Elizabeth girls, well-mannered, clean-cut girls, always Christian, mainly Irish Catholic, whose fathers and brothers and uncles worked for Singer Sewing Machine or for the biscuit company or down at the port. He figured nice Christian girls would make the customers feel more at home. If asked to, the girls would try on the jewelry for the customers, model it for them, and if we were lucky, the women would wind up buying. As my father told us, when a pretty young woman wears a piece of jewelry, other women think that when they wear the piece of jewelry they'll look like that too. The guys off the docks at the port who came in looking for engagement rings and wedding rings for their girlfriends would sometimes have the temerity to take the salesgirl's hand in order to examine the stone up

close. My brother liked to be around the girls too, and that was long before he could even begin to understand what it was he was enjoying so much. He would help the girls empty the window and the showcases at the end of the day. He'd do anything at all to help them. They'd empty the windows and cases of everything but the cheapest stuff, and just before closing time this little kid would open the big safe in the backroom with the combination my father had entrusted to him. I'd done all these jobs before him, including getting as close as I could to the girls, especially to two blond sisters named Harriet and May. Over the years there was Harriet, May, Annmarie, Jean, there was Myra, Mary, Patty, there was Kathleen and Corine, and every one of them took a shine to that kid. Corine, the great beauty, would sit at the workbench in the backroom in early November and she and my kid brother would address the catalogues the store printed up and sent to all the customers for the holiday buying season, when my father was open six nights a week and everybody worked like a dog. If you gave my brother a box of envelopes, he could count them faster than anybody because his fingers were so dexterous and because he counted the envelopes by

fives. I'd look in and, sure enough, that's what he'd be doing—showing off with the envelopes for Corine. How that boy loved doing everything that went along with being the jeweler's reliable son! That was our father's favorite accolade —'reliable.' Over the years our father sold wedding rings to Elizabeth's Irish and Germans and Slovaks and Italians and Poles, most of them young working-class stiff. Half the time, after he'd made the sale, we'd be invited, the whole family, to the wedding. People liked him—he had a sense of humor and he kept his prices low and he extended credit to everyone, so we'd go—first to the church, then on to the noisy festivities. There was the Depression, there was the war, but there were also the weddings, there were our salesgirls, there were the trips to Newark on the bus with hundreds of dollars' worth of diamonds stashed away in envelopes in the pockets of our mackinaws. On the outside of each envelope were the instructions for the setter or the sizer written by our father. There was the five-foot-high Mosley safe slotted for all the jewelry trays that we carefully put away every night and removed every morning . . . and all of this constituted the core of

my brother's life as a good little boy." Howie's eyes rested on the coffin again. "And now what?" he asked. "I think this had better be all there is. Going on and on, remembering still more . . . but why not remember? What's another gallon of tears between family and friends? When our father died my brother asked me if I minded if he took our father's watch. It was a Hamilton, made in Lancaster, P-A, and according to the expert, the boss, the best watch this country ever produced. Whenever he sold one, our father never failed to assure the customer that he'd made no mistake. 'See, I wear one myself. A very, very highly respected watch, the Hamilton. To my mind,' he'd say, 'the premier American-made watch, bar none.' Seventy-nine fifty, if I remember correctly. Everything for sale in those days had to end in fifty. Hamilton had a great reputation. It *was* a classy watch, my dad did love his, and when my brother said he'd like to own it, I couldn't have been happier. He could have taken the jeweler's loupe and our father's diamond carrying case. That was the worn old leather case that he would always carry with him in his coat pocket whenever he went to do business outside the store:

with the tweezers in it, and the tiny screwdrivers and the little ring of sizers that gauge the size of a round stone and the folded white papers for holding the loose diamonds. The beautiful, cherished little things he worked with, which he held in his hands and next to his heart, yet we decided to bury the loupe and the case and all its contents in his grave. He always kept the loupe in one pocket and his cigarettes in the other, so we stuck the loupe inside his shroud. I remember my brother saying, 'By all rights we should put it in his eye.' That's what grief can do to you. That's how thrown we were. We didn't know what else to do. Rightly or wrongly, there didn't seem to us anything but that to do. Because they were not just his—they were *him* . . . To finish up about the Hamilton, my father's old Hamilton with the crown that you would turn to wind it every morning and that you would pull out on its stem to turn to move the hands . . . except while he was in swimming, my brother wore it day and night. He took it off for good only forty-eight hours ago. He handed it to the nurse to lock away for safekeeping while he was having the surgery that killed him. In the car on the way to the cemetery this morning, my niece Nancy

showed me that she'd put a new notch in the band and now it's she who's wearing the Hamilton to tell time by."

Then came the sons, men in their late forties and looking, with their glossy black hair and their eloquent dark eyes and the sensual fullness of their wide, identical mouths, just like their father (and like their uncle) at their age. Handsome men beginning to grow beefy and seemingly as closely linked with each other as they'd been irreconcilably alienated from the dead father. The younger, Lonny, stepped up to the grave first. But once he'd taken a clod of dirt in his hand, his entire body began to tremble and quake, and it looked as though he were on the edge of violently regurgitating. He was overcome with a feeling for his father that wasn't antagonism but that his antagonism denied him the means to release. When he opened his mouth, nothing emerged except a series of grotesque gasps, making it appear likely that whatever had him in its grip would never be finished with him. He was in so desperate a state that Randy, the older, more decisive son, the scolding son, came instantly to his rescue. He took the clod of dirt from the hand of the younger one and tossed it onto the casket for

both of them. And he readily met with success when he went to speak. "Sleep easy, Pop," Randy said, but any note of tenderness, grief, love, or loss was terrifyingly absent from his voice.

The last to approach the coffin was the private duty nurse, Maureen, a battler from the look of her and no stranger to either life or death. When, with a smile, she let the dirt slip slowly across her curled palm and out the side of her hand onto the coffin, the gesture looked like the prelude to a carnal act. Clearly this was a man to whom she'd once given much thought.

That was the end. No special point had been made. Did they all say what they had to say? No, they didn't, and of course they did. Up and down the state that day, there'd been five hundred funerals like his, routine, ordinary, and except for the thirty wayward seconds furnished by the sons—and Howie's resurrecting with such painstaking precision the world as it innocently existed before the invention of death, life perpetual in their father-created Eden, a paradise just fifteen feet wide by forty feet deep disguised as an old-style jewelry store—no more or less interesting than any of the others. But then it's the commonness that's most wrench-

ing, the registering once more of the fact of death that overwhelms everything.

In a matter of minutes, everybody had walked away—wearily and tearfully walked away from our species' least favorite activity—and he was left behind. Of course, as when anyone dies, though many were grief-stricken, others remained unperturbed, or found themselves relieved, or, for reasons good or bad, were genuinely pleased.

Though he had grown accustomed to being on his own and fending for himself since his last divorce ten years back, in his bed the night before the surgery he worked at remembering as exactly as he could each of the women who had been there waiting for him to rise out of the anesthetic in the recovery room, even remembering that most helpless of mates, the last wife, with whom recovering from quintuple bypass surgery had not been a sublime experience. The sublime experience had been the private nurse with the unassuming professional air who'd come home with him from the hospital and who tended him with a high-spirited devotion that promoted a slow, steady recovery and with whom, unknown to his wife, he conducted a sustained af-

fair once he had recovered his sexual prowess. Maureen. Maureen Mrazek. He'd called all over trying to find Maureen. He'd wanted her to come and be his nurse, should he need a nurse, when he got home from the hospital this time. But sixteen years had passed, and the nursing agency at the hospital had lost track of her. She'd be forty-eight now, more than likely married and a mother, a shapely, energetic young woman grown into middle-aged stoutness while the battle to remain an unassailable man had by then been lost by him, time having transformed his own body into a storehouse for man-made contraptions designed to fend off collapse. Defusing thoughts of his own demise had never required more diligence and cunning.

A lifetime later, he remembered the trip to the hospital with his mother for his hernia operation in the fall of 1942, a bus ride lasting no more than ten minutes. Usually if he was traveling somewhere with his mother, it was in the family car and his father was driving. But now there were just the two of them alone together on the bus, and they were headed for the hospital where he had been born, and she was what calmed his apprehension and allowed him to be brave. As a small child he'd had his

tonsils removed at the hospital, but otherwise he'd never been back there. Now he was to stay for four days and four nights. He was a sensible boy of nine with no conspicuous problems, but on the bus he felt much younger and found that he required his mother's proximity in ways he thought he'd outgrown. 9

His brother, a high school freshman, was in class, and his father had driven the car to work well before he and his mother left for the hospital. A small overnight case rested on his mother's lap. In it were a toothbrush, pajamas, a bathrobe and slippers, and the books he'd brought with him to read. He could still remember which books they were. The hospital was around the corner from the local branch library, so his mother could replenish his reading material should he read through the books he'd brought for his hospital stay. He was to spend a week convalescing at home before returning to school, and he was more anxious about all the school he was missing than he was as yet about the ether mask that he knew they would clamp over his face to anesthetize him. In the early forties hospitals didn't as yet permit parents to stay overnight with their children, and so he'd be sleeping without his mother,

his father, or his brother anywhere nearby. He was anxious about that, too.

His mother was well-spoken and mannerly, as, in turn, were the women who registered him at the admissions office and the nurses at the nurses' station when he and his mother made their way by elevator to the children's wing of the surgical floor. His mother took his overnight case because, small as it was, he wasn't supposed to carry anything until after his hernia was repaired and he had fully recuperated. He had discovered the swelling in his left groin a few months earlier and had told no one but just tried pressing it down with his fingers to make it go away. He did not know exactly what a hernia was or what significance to give to swelling located so close to his genitals.

In those days a doctor could prescribe a stiff corset with metal stays if the family didn't want the child to undergo surgery or if they couldn't afford it. He knew of a boy at school who wore such a corset, and one of the reasons he'd told no one about the swelling was his fear that he too would have to wear a corset and reveal it to the other boys when he changed into his shorts for gym class.

Once he had finally confessed to his parents, his

father took him to the doctor's office. Quickly the doctor examined him and made the diagnosis and, after conversing with his father for a few minutes, arranged for the surgery. Everything was done with astonishing speed, and the doctor—the very one who had delivered him into the world—assured him that he was going to be fine and then went on to joke about the comic strip *Li'l Abner*, which the two of them enjoyed reading in the evening paper.

The surgeon, Dr. Smith, was said by his parents to be the best in the city. Like the boy's own father, Dr. Smith, born Solly Smulowitz, had grown up in the slums, the son of poor immigrants.

He was in bed in his room within an hour of arriving at the hospital, though the surgery was not scheduled until the following morning—that's how patients were tended to then.

In the bed next to his was a boy who'd had stomach surgery and wasn't allowed to get up and walk yet. The boy's mother sat beside the bed holding her son's hand. When the father came to visit after work, the parents spoke in Yiddish, which made him think that they were too worried to speak understandable English in their son's presence. The only place where he heard Yiddish spoken was at the

jewelry store when the war refugees came in search of Schaffhausen watches, a hard-to-find brand that his father would call around to try to locate for them—"Schaffhausen—I want a Schaffhausen," that would be the extent of their English. Of course Yiddish was spoken all but exclusively when the Hasidic Jews from New York traveled to Elizabeth once or twice a month to replenish the store's diamond inventory—for his father to have maintained a large inventory in his own safe would have been too expensive. There were far fewer Hasidic diamond merchants in America before the war than after, but his father, from the very beginning, preferred to deal with them rather than with the big diamond houses. The diamond merchant who came most frequently—and whose migration route had carried him and his family in only a few years from Warsaw to Antwerp to New York—was an older man dressed in a large black hat and a long black coat of a kind that you never saw on anyone else in Elizabeth's streets, not even other Jews. He wore a beard and sidelocks and kept the waist pouch that held his diamonds secreted beneath fringed undergarments whose religious significance eluded the nascent secularist—that, in fact, seemed ludicrous to

him—even after his father explained why the Hasidim still wore what their ancestors had worn in the old country two hundred years before and lived much as they did then, though, as he pointed out to his father again and again, they were now in America, free to dress and to shave and to behave as they wished. When one of the seven sons of the diamond merchant got married, the merchant invited their entire family to the wedding in Brooklyn. All the men there had beards and all the women wore wigs and the sexes sat on different sides of the synagogue, separated by a wall—afterward the men and the women did not even dance together—and everything about that wedding he and Howie hated. When the diamond merchant arrived at the store he would remove his coat but leave on his hat, and the two men would sit behind the showcase chatting amiably together in Yiddish, the language that his father's parents, his own grandparents, had continued to speak in their immigrant households with their American-born children for as long as they lived. But when it was time to look at the diamonds, the two went into the backroom, where there was a safe and a workbench and a brown linoleum floor and, jammed together behind a door that never shut

completely even when you had successfully struggled to hook it from within, a toilet and a tiny sink. His father always paid on the spot with a check.

After closing the store with Howie's help—pulling the lattice gate with the padlocks across the shop's display window, switching on the burglar alarm, and throwing all the locks on the front door—his father showed up in his younger son's hospital room and gave him a hug.

He was there when Dr. Smith came around to introduce himself. The surgeon was wearing a business suit rather than a white coat, and his father jumped to his feet as soon as he saw him enter the room. "It's Dr. Smith!" his father cried.

"So this is my patient," Dr. Smith said. "Well," he told him, coming to the side of the bed to take him firmly by the shoulder, "we're going to fix that hernia tomorrow and you'll be as good as new. What position do you like to play?" he asked.

"End."

"Well, you're going to be back playing end before you know it. You're going to play anything you want. You get a good night's sleep and I'll see you in the morning."

Daring to joke with the eminent surgeon, his

father said, "And you get a good night's sleep too."

When his dinner came, his mother and father sat and talked to him as though they were all at home. They spoke quietly so as not to disturb the sick boy or his parents, who were silent now, the mother still seated beside him and the father incessantly pacing at the foot of the bed and then out into the corridor and back. The boy hadn't so much as stirred while they were there.

At five to eight a nurse stuck her head in to announce that visiting hours were over. The parents of the other boy again spoke together in Yiddish and, after the mother repeatedly kissed the boy's forehead, they left the room. The father had tears running down his face.

Then his own parents left to go home to his brother and eat a late dinner together in the kitchen without him. His mother kissed him and held him tightly to her. "You can do it, son," his father said, leaning over to kiss him as well. "It's like when I give you an errand to run on the bus or a job to do at the store. Whatever it is, you never let me down. Reliable—my two reliable boys! I pop my buttons when I think about my boys. Always, you do the work like the thorough, careful, hard-

working boys you were brought up to be. Carrying precious jewels to Newark and back, quarter-carat, half-carat diamonds in your pocket, and at your age that doesn't faze you. You look to all the world like it's some junk you found in your Cracker Jacks. Well, if you can do that job, you can do this job. It's just another job of work as far as you're concerned. Do the work, finish the job, and by tomorrow the whole thing will be over. You hear the bell, you come out fighting. Right?"

"Right," the boy said. .

"By the time I see you tomorrow, Dr. Smith will have fixed that thing, and that'll be the end of that."

"Right."

"My two terrific boys!"

Then they were gone and he was alone with the boy in the next bed. He reached over to his bedside table, where his mother had piled his books, and began to read *The Swiss Family Robinson*. Then he tried *Treasure Island*. Then *Kim*. Then he put his hand under the covers to look for the hernia. The swelling was gone. He knew from past experience that there were days when the swelling would temporarily subside, but this time he was sure that it had subsided for good and that he no longer needed an

operation. When a nurse came by to take his temperature, he didn't know how to tell her that the hernia had disappeared and that his parents should be called to come take him home. She looked approvingly at the titles of the books he'd brought and told him that he was free to get out of bed to use the bathroom but that otherwise he should make himself comfortable reading until she returned to put out the lights. She said nothing about the other boy, who he was sure was going to die.

At first he didn't fall asleep because of his waiting for the boy to die, and then he didn't because he couldn't stop thinking of the drowned body that had washed up on the beach that past summer. It was the body of a seaman whose tanker had been torpedoed by a German U-boat. The Coast Guard beach patrol had found the body amid the oil scum and shattered cargo cases at the edge of the beach that was only a block away from the house where his family of four rented a room for a month each summer. Most days the water was clear and he didn't worry that a drowned man would collide with his bare legs as he stepped out into the low surf. But when oil from torpedoed tankers clotted the sand and caked the bottom of his feet as he crossed the

beach, he was terrified of stumbling upon a corpse. Or stumbling upon a saboteur, coming ashore to work for Hitler. Armed with rifles or submachine guns and often accompanied by trained dogs, the Coast Guardsmen patrolled day and night to prevent saboteurs from landing on the miles of deserted beaches. Yet some sneaked through without detection and, along with native-born Nazi sympathizers, were known to be in ship-to-shore communication with the U-boats that prowled the East Coast shipping lanes and had been sinking ships off New Jersey since the war began. The war was closer than most people imagined, and so was the horror. His father had read that the waters of New Jersey were "the worst ship graveyard" along the entire U.S. coastline, and now, in the hospital, he couldn't get the word "graveyard" to stop tormenting him, nor could he erase from his mind that bloated dead body the Coast Guard had removed from the few inches of surf in which it lay, while he and his brother looked on from the boardwalk.

Sometime after he'd fallen asleep he heard noises in the room and awakened to see that the curtain between the two beds had been pulled to screen

off the other bed and that there were doctors and nurses at work on the other side—he could see their forms moving and could hear them whispering. When one of the nurses emerged from behind the curtain, she realized that he was awake and came over to his bed and told him softly, "Go back to sleep. You have a big day tomorrow." "What's the matter?" he asked. "Nothing," she said, "we're changing his bandages. Close your eyes and go to sleep."

He was awakened early the next morning for the operation, and there was his mother, already at the hospital and smiling at him from the foot of the bed.

"Good morning, darling. How's my brave boy?"

Looking across at the other bed, he saw that it was stripped of its bedding. Nothing could have made clearer to him what had happened than the sight of the bare mattress ticking and the uncovered pillows piled in the middle of the empty bed.

"That boy died," he said. Memorable enough that he was in the hospital that young, but even more memorable that he had registered a death. The first was the bloated body, the second was this boy. During the night, when he had awakened to see the