



# Reservation Road



John Burnham Schwartz

'A triumph of form, pacing and power'

*New York Times*

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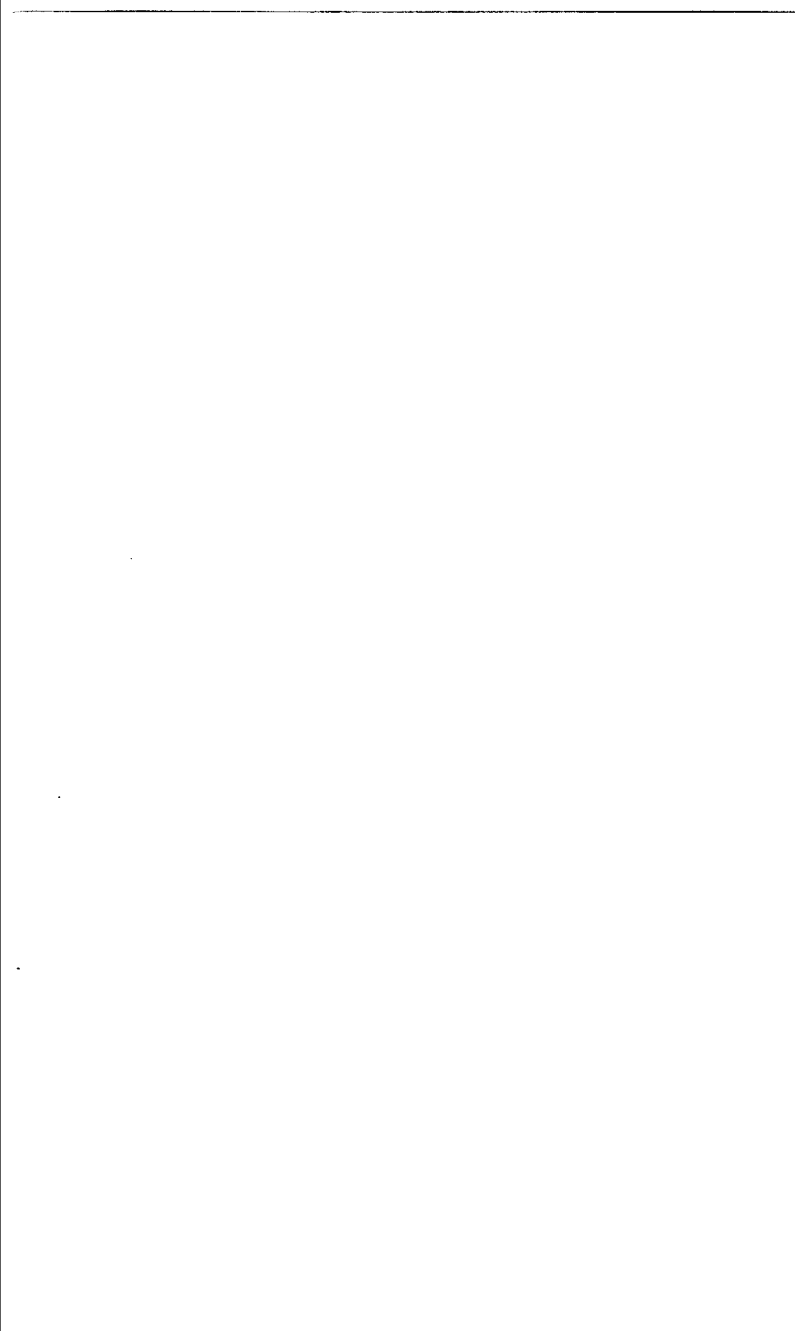
*For Aleksandra*

In Memory of  
F. Ned Rosen  
1965-1997

*Oh, that I had the indictment  
written by my adversary!  
Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;  
I would bind it on me as a crown;  
I would give him an account of all my steps;  
like a prince I would approach him.*

—The Book of Job

# Part One





## Ethan

I want to tell this right. On a beautiful summer's day we picnicked in a field as an orchestra played under a yellow tent.

The clouds began to gather in the blue sky around five o'clock. Handel was finished and Beethoven was still to come, the Ninth with full chorus, and there were couples strolling across the lush green field and two teenage boys tossing a Frisbee back and forth, the white disc chased by a barking black dog. And then Emma stood up and said she wanted to go home; she was eight years old and didn't much care for Beethoven. Grace suggested a walk instead, and Emma grudgingly accepted, and mother and daughter went off hand in hand, leaving Josh and me alone.

Room was being made for the chorus under the tent. They stood on the grass, in evening clothes, talking or limbering up their voices. Snatches of notes, bits of German, came floating over to us. And for perhaps the second or third time that day, I explained to my son that the final chorus of the Ninth Symphony was in fact Schiller's 'Ode to Joy.'

Josh merely nodded. He was a thin, private boy of ten, with dark, curly hair like mine. Sometimes he was a mystery to me. He'd been studying the violin seriously since his seventh birthday and was already well acquainted with Beethoven. Countless times he'd sat with me in my study listening to a scratchy recording of the Bayreuth

Festival Orchestra and Chorus performing the Ninth Symphony, with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf singing soprano.

Now he reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a flat, putty-colored stone. Staring off into the distance, he began polishing it with his thumb. I followed his gaze and there was the black dog leaping into the air after the Frisbee and the Frisbee floating just beyond the dog's reach. I asked him what he had there, in his hand.

He looked up at me – surprised, as if he'd thought he was alone.

'That stone.'

'Arrowhead,' he replied, looking away again.

'Can I see it?'

He shrugged, holding out his hand, palm up. I took the arrowhead from him, turning it over in my own hand. It was a fine specimen, the point still defined, the surface at once jagged and smooth. 'It's a nice one,' I said. 'Where'd you get it?'

'Found it.'

'You should take it into science class when school starts. You'd be a big hit with that thing.'

He shrugged.

'When I was your age, I –'

'Can I have it back now?'

I felt the blood rise in my face. I had a powerful urge to throw the arrowhead across the field and into the trees, but I was his father and did no such thing. 'Sure,' I said. I gave it back to him. And then we sat without speaking for some minutes, until Grace and Emma returned from their walk, and the four of us were settled peacefully again on our blanket.

'Find anything on your travels?' I inquired.

'A really fat lady,' Emma said.

'Emma,' Grace said.

'She was.'

'Shh,' said Josh, 'it's starting.'

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The tent had fallen still, voices and instruments silenced. The conductor in his black tails tapped the air with his baton, and there was a single cough from an oboist in the third row. And then the explosion of the first bars, like the sky opening. I looked at Josh. He'd shifted to his knees to get a better view of the violinists in the first row. His back had gone perfectly straight and his lips were moving.

I will never forget the final movement. How the voices entered forcefully from the first, resonant yet still earth-bound, to be joined by a multitude of others. How the sound grew from inside the yellow tent until it became a god, and the conductor's body seemed to beat to its calling. And finally, how my son, alone among us all, got to his feet and remained there, standing and silent, long after the music had ended.

The sun was low in the sky when we started the drive back. It had fallen into a cloud behind the verdant trees and the light emanating from there was seashell pink. In the backseat of the station wagon, Emma had fallen asleep with her thumb in her mouth and Josh was staring out the window, humming.

The next half-hour or so was a disappearance; the light just withdrew, shrinking back behind the curtain. Roadside trees turned ever softer – until, all at once, it seemed, they were granite. I switched on the headlights. Heading south on Route 7, we crossed the state line into Canaan, bumped over the train tracks that ran there, passed the Connecticut State Police barracks on our right and then on our left my dentist, Dr. Zinser, and Tommy's Diner. A quarter of a mile further on, I turned east onto Reservation Road, which was the locals' shortcut between Route 7 and our town of Wyndham Falls.

We were twenty minutes from home. It was dark now. Reservation Road was narrow and unlit and flanked throughout by woods on both sides. Above the trees the

sky sat like an enormous bruise. We were rounding a turn when suddenly I saw a stirring in the air at the outer edge of the headlight beams, like a small cloud of upward-falling rain. The car punched into it and instantly the windshield was splattered with dead insects. I braked hard but kept the car rolling.

'What was that?' said Grace.

'Bugs,' Josh said excitedly. 'A swarm.'

I corrected him. 'Mayflies.'

'It's not May any more,' he said.

I switched on the wipers, but they succeeded only in streaking the glass with dead insects. When I tried for wiper fluid, I found there wasn't any. The wipers were squeaking against the glass and I turned them off. I was irritable; the concert seemed long ago. 'Goddamnit.'

In a sweet, just-awake voice Emma said, 'Don't curse, Dad.'

'I could've sworn you were asleep,' I said.

'"Damn" isn't a curse,' said Josh.

'Thank you, Josh.' I tried to find his face in the rearview mirror, but it was angled up for driving at night and all I could see was the smoke-black roof above his head. For some reason the incident with the mayflies had unsettled me, as if I'd been grazed by a hand in the dark.

Grace touched my arm. 'Okay?'

I nodded, relaxing a little at her touch.

Then Emma said, 'I have to go to the bathroom.'

Grace turned and looked at her. 'We're almost home.'

'How long?'

'Twenty minutes, tops,' I said.

'I can't hold it.'

Grace sighed. 'Yes, you can.'

'I can't.'

'She's being a baby,' said Josh.

'I am not!'

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'Josh,' Grace said, 'that's enough.' Then to me: ~~Ethan~~, let's just stop.'

'Absolutely not,' I said. 'Anyway, stop ~~where?~~'

'There's that little gas station just up ahead, isn't there?'

Yes, there was, just ahead. And, I thought, the windshield was dirty with mayflies and we were out of wiper fluid. Perhaps we could buy some there.

Tod's Gas and Auto Body sat on the far side of a deep curve in the road, a break in the trees that might have felt like an oasis if it hadn't felt like a junkyard. The floodlight meant to illuminate the two old-fashioned pumps was broken, and the red neon sign that Tod's father had installed during headier days had been reduced by attrition to the first three letters, leaving a pitiful air of unfulfilled expectations. Half a wrecked car lay abandoned to the right of the low, flat-roofed building. It was a dark and uninviting place to be at night. The only indications of life were the buzzing three letters and a single lighted window next to the garage area, through which we could see, as we pulled in off the road, a young man sitting on a stool reading a magazine.

All four of us got out of the car; we left the doors open as if running for our lives. I got a rag from the glove box and began cleaning the windshield, while Grace took Emma inside. The door was glass, and small bells trilled when they opened it. I stopped what I was doing to watch them. Framed against the gloaming outside, the interior of the office shone stage-bright. And I saw the incongruous beauty of my wife and daughter, their two blond heads set in my mind against Josh's and mine, our coloring so different from theirs. I saw my wife speaking and the young man - dressed in jeans and an untucked plaid shirt - handing over the key to the bathroom, and there was something shy in his manner, though it was all theater to me, the room lit just so. And then Grace and Emma went

out, the bells trilling, and they walked around the side of the building and out of my sight.

'Dad.'

I turned. It was Josh, behind me, standing in the shadows near the road. Wearing a navy Windbreaker, unfaded blue jeans, and black sneakers, he was almost invisible except for his face, which was colored a faint neon red from the surviving letters on top of the garage. I had no idea how he'd come to be standing so close to the road.

'Move away from the road, Josh.'

Josh looked at the ground and stuffed his hands in his pockets; it was clear that I'd let him down yet again, had, at some fundamental level, failed to respect his sense of himself. My face grew warm. 'Hey,' I said with false lightness. I extended a hand out into the air for no reason, a professorial affectation. I missed the feeling of the concert, sitting in the field with my son and listening to music.

'I'm not a baby, Dad,' he said to the ground.

'Of course you're not,' I said. 'You're my son. And I'm just being your father the best way I know how. Forgive me?'

He was silent, looking at his feet. When he finally looked up again, I almost smiled with guilty relief. 'What about the bugs?' he asked.

'Bugs?' Then I remembered. 'Ah, the *mayflies*,' I said declaratively, as though I were not here with my son but at the college teaching The Novel Since the Second World War. A new literary movement, perhaps. Just then I felt certain I was a fool. 'We're out of wiper fluid. Why don't we go see if they have any?'

He hesitated, then shook his head.

I wanted to warn him to stay clear of the road, but I'd learned my lesson. 'Hold the fort,' I told him instead, and

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walked toward the lighted window, where the young man was again reading his magazine.

At the door to the building, I turned to check on my son. His back was to me. He was standing where I'd left him, staring across the dark curve of road. He seemed someplace else, as though he were still back at the concert. And I wondered if it was music playing in his head, notes like shooting stars.

The small bells trilled when I opened the door. The young man looked up from his reading but didn't stir from the stool. He was younger than I'd thought, with lingering acne and an attempt at a goatee. He had shuffled his feet and gone shy in the presence of my lovely wife, but before me his eyes betrayed a quick hard judgment followed by withdrawal; his remove was daunting. Perhaps he had me pegged for a rich weekender. He couldn't have guessed that I was worse than that, an academic. I wasn't rich, but my life was secure. That had always been its fundamental premise.

He said he wasn't sure he had any wiper fluid left, he'd have to check. He went through a door into the adjoining garage and turned on the light. In the middle of the grease-stained floor a car was raised on cement blocks, the engine sitting beneath it like a fallen heart. The odors of oil and gas were overpowering, and suddenly I felt the onset of a headache. I wanted to be home, reading a book, with a drink in my hand.

The young man reappeared carrying a gallon jug of blue wiper fluid. I handed him the money and took the jug. The weight of it surprised me; I didn't feel strong. The bells trilled, and I started back to the car with my head down, studying my left knee, which was inexplicably sore, musing on my tennis game and my body and my age.

I want to tell this right. I was thirty-eight years old. I had spent my entire adult life reading meanings into other

people's stories, finding the figure in the carpet, the order in things. God in the details and no place else.

The car came from nowhere. No, it came from the left, racing around the bend in the road. The tires screamed and I looked up. The car was dark blue or green or black. Only one of the headlights worked. It broke from the trees like an apparition. And my son was standing in the dark road. My son's head was down as if he were looking for something. I shouted his name and his head jerked up, and then he saw the light coming at him. And in that light as it climbed him from the feet up, his eyes grew wide and his mouth dropped open but made no sound. The right front of the car struck him dead in the chest. It sounded like ice cracking. His body flew thirty feet.



## Grace

The gas station appeared up ahead as they came out of the turn. And without warning the words were ringing inside her, signaling a sudden change of heart: *Not this, not here.* The place dilapidated, decrepit, abandoned, dark; the sign partially blown out; a car wrecked like a ship and left to rot among the weeds. All wrong, not at all what she'd ordered. But Ethan was already braking, pulling over; it was already happening. To try to change his mind now would be to admit to the same old fear. He'd complain that it was time, finally, just to let it go. Yes, of course. But how? Not so easy. *All my life*, she thought. The car slowed still more and then, distinctly, it was the tires she heard, tread by tread over the road, pebbles and sticks, slower and slower, the car listing to the right, while she berated herself, castigated herself, and thought: *This is ridiculous.* And was eight years old again.

The grass had been watered that morning; the feel of it cool and still wet between her bare toes. She could hear them by the pool, behind her as she went into the house: Daddy laughing loudly, like a happy horse, at something one of the guests had said. In the kitchen Gloria was standing at the counter slicing tomatoes for lunch. She held up the pitcher with both hands, and Gloria, smiling down at her, filled it with iced tea from another pitcher, and then she went back outside. The pitcher was heavy and made