FICTION

In the Right Hands

Don McDermott

"LET'S SEE WHAT SORT OF SURPRISES await us in Jennifer's story," Jean-Paul said wearily and shuffled the story pages on his desk, as though by doing so he would impose order on narrative chaos. What he saw when he looked up was an evening class full of undergraduate literati—the more serious showing signs of neurosis, the less earnest having at least adopted the notion that eccentricity was a first cousin to genius. One student refused to turn in anything that wasn't written with a calligraphy pen; another wore a Panama hat and an apricot scarf. There was a third, a young woman whose hair was long and flowing on her left side and short, almost a butch cut, on the right—she could write with equal dexterity from either hand. What he wanted was to see her write with both at the same time.

Jean-Paul had long since surrendered the adage that everyone has "one good novel" in them. He was trying to hold on to the illusion that most have at least "one reasonable short story." But he was losing his grip.

"The story—and a very precious story it is—," he began, knowing that his students would misunderstand his choice of words, would think he meant to say valuable, when he intended something quite different, "—is about a child's death and her—what? Resuscitation?"

Jennifer looked up through her turtle shell glasses and smiled with glossy lips. "It's sort of a miracle story, actually."

The story—about four pages long—was quite simple and did not require much finesse to ferret out its theme. A child, about five, falls in a pond and drowns. Then the child undergoes a near-death experience. Every cliché in the sub-genre was there—a blinding light at the end of a tunnel, a personage in white gauze, a visit with departed loved-ones, the injunction that the child was to return to life, for she had not yet completed her "mission" in life. There was only one interesting twist—the gender reversal of having a tomboy for a boy. Jean-Paul's reservoir of patience was bone dry. Good God! he thought, what does one do with such people?

As was his custom, Jean-Paul tried to disengage himself from his sarcasm. He took sustenance from a coffee mug that he carried to almost every class of late and began asking his students what they thought of the story.

"I thought it was really interesting," said one girl. "You could almost see him going through all those experiences."

Someone noted that the main character was female.

Another said, "I kept wondering how old this girl is and if she could really have remembered her grandparents since they had been dead for some time, but I thought it was really great! It would make a super movie!"

This continued ad nauseam, and he wondered what Nabokov had done with his creative writing classes. He could see that if the class period was to be something other than an awards ceremony, he would have to be the heavy. From the first day he had seen the students currying favor with one another, hoping to bank sympathy for their stories yet to be dissected. What he would have given for a student with an "attitude."

Jean-Paul himself had had some success in the world of publishing. A book of short stories, *What Men Really Do When They Go Fishing,* and a novel in paperback about prostitutes in Hamburg who were really agents for the PLO. It was lurid and formula hack work; nevertheless, he awoke every morning with the conviction that were it not for affirmative action (whose main beneficiaries were women) he would be at a major state university, teaching five classes a year instead of eight, to students who had scored higher than 900 on their SATs. His best students wrote stories based on re-runs of "Star Trek" or checkout-counter romances. Their characters, if they emerged from sterile flat settings at all, never failed, never lost, never died (glorious martyrdoms excepted)—in fact, the students loved their characters so much, they were never even threatened with any of the above.

"No, your characters mustn't have a life that is better than yours in every respect—worry-free, happy, full of love, money. They must live lives that are worse. You don't like it, I know, but sometimes you have to hurt the ones you love, hurt your characters, make them suffer—kill their spouses, have them lose their jobs, amputate their arms. Something. Life is struggle and sacrifice and—sad to say—tragic." His students agreed, but did they really understand? They nodded the nod of dashboard dolls whose heads bobbed on a spring. He had said all this before, but just try convincing a Chi Omega looking forward to the Sigma Chi Winter Carnival that life is tragic.

"But what are we going to do with Jennifer's story? Have the child just die? What? No return from the City of Dreadful Night? Not much of a story there. Why did the child fall in the pond?"

"She was after a spotted salamander."

Jennifer sounded rather definite about that. "Maybe you need to tell us more about this girl. As it is, the story begins by throwing her in, and although we understand the action that follows, we don't understand the character. What sort of kid is she?"

"Well, she was sort of a tomboy. She really liked to play with bugs."

"What do you mean 'play'?" When Jean-Paul was a boy he "played" with bugs. He'd take bright red ladybugs and drop them into spider webs. Then he'd look on in horror and fascination at the auto-da-fé.

"She used to make ant farms out of empty coke bottles."

Jean-Paul pushed her to explain.

"She'd have a whole colony down there."

Some of the students thought the discussion was off the rails now, but Jean-Paul wanted to get to something peculiar. "Character isn't created out of ordinary interests—everybody does that—but peculiar details, habits, obsessions. Listen, when I was a boy my mother used to complain that all the soup spoons were flat on bottom. I used to use them to crush ants. If you looked carefully, you could see the crenelated ant parts imbedded in the underbelly of the spoon." Jean-Paul's students thought he was only being funny. In fact, Jean-Paul had been a sadist. Some thought he still was.

"Geez, actually," Jennifer said and began to blush slightly, "once I took some black ants and put them in the same bottle with the red ants, and then I'd just put my eye to the mouth of the bottle and watch them fight."

Now that was something. Jean-Paul thought the whole thing a wonderful analogy for God and man. He wanted to say, we're all like ants down here, some of us black, some red, yellow, some white, and God tosses us all into this little bottle so he can watch us go at one another.

"Did you ever pour water down into the bottle—did you ever just drown the little beggars?"

"Noooo," she said, amused but acting appalled by the implication that she could do such a thing.

"You might think about adding that to your story," he said, "and that might explain why at the end your character runs to her ant colony." Then another girl objected that she wasn't sure she wanted to read a story about saving ants.

"That's not exactly the way it happened, though," Jennifer replied.

"That's right, it's your story," Jean-Paul conceded. "So what did happen?"

"Well, the child died, and then she met this figure in a white robe, who . . . "

"Can I interrupt here? Okay, the figure in white is God or something,

right?" Jennifer nodded. "And although your story gives no details here, I'll bet he was a white guy."

"It was Jesus Christ."

"Okay—Jesus. That's what we all expect, right? Didn't everybody expect Jesus?" Jean-Paul asked, addressing himself to the class at large. "But let's suppose that the guy she meets is black—a black Jesus—or let's suppose the guy she meets is a woman—heck, let's say the guy turns out to be Perry Mason; what happens to the story then? Wouldn't the child have to wonder, 'Am I dreaming all this, or was Perry Mason God all this time and nobody knew it?' You're all looking at me like I'm nuts but consider this: wasn't Jesus sort of a public defender—always sticking up for the little guy accused of a sin, and isn't that exactly what Perry Mason did every week on TV?" Jean-Paul chuckled and continued, "Can you imagine Christians all over the world going into the great cathedrals, taking down crucifixes and putting up statues of Perry Mason? Imagine 'Ironsides,' from the television role which he had made so popular, sitting atop a gigantic lotus bulb in a Buddhist temple. Now we have a surprise worth pursuing—and I think we would have an audience for that sort of story!"

The student author looked down at her story without expression. The rest of the class looked on, some feeling desecration and blasphemy, others with annoyance at the leap of Jean-Paul's skewed imagination.

"What are you trying to do to my story?"

Jean-Paul couldn't see her face, but he was sure that tears were welling in her eyes. He intended no mockery.

"Sorry, I was just trying to make it mean something."

Jennifer cleared her throat, said something like, "It does mean something," and got to her feet. But there was something else, almost inaudible.

"What's that?"

"I said . . . screw you!" She hugged her notebook to her bosom and left the room. The class took courage at the incident and were fully prepared to dismiss themselves if he didn't do it right then. He let them go, but he wasn't upset; in fact, he was even mildly pleased that she had used language that surprised him, language that gave her own character, which had always appeared to him to be a bit flat, more range, more depth. He shoved his papers into his brief case and surveyed the empty classroom.

It had occurred to him that he had been a bit too arch in his criticism. But how, he asked himself, could he teach anyone to write without criticizing their jejune notions? He hadn't had a model to follow. His own teachers had been lazy-minded and patronizing. They had taught him

nothing. But was he really trying to help his students or just wreak a little vengeance on anyone who clung to fairy tales? Did these kids of his even have the capacity to benefit from his insight? They lived in a world of innocent titillation, big toys, and funny money from home. They had beliefs which they had not reasoned and convictions which they had not earned. He vacillated between wanting to warn them—though admittedly it might jeopardize their tourist status in the real world—and tossing up his hands and saying, "*Qué sera sera.*"

There was much to be said for the second course. He knew for a fact that some of the students were beginning to hate him for imagined insults. They didn't say anything, of course. That would show too much integrity, but at the end of the term, they would sharpen their pencils and go to work on his student evaluations. Screw them. Screw teaching if need be. He thought for a moment of his own ideals and dreams. Though he had long since written them off as so much fantasy, he still derived pleasure from imagining himself a sort of Abelard to his students, his words thundering through medieval cathedrals, challenging the Pope if necessary to speak the truth. Or he saw himself relaxed, in a more genial setting, his students sitting before him on the marble steps of the Acropolis, under the shade of an olive tree, or perhaps within the shadow of the Parthenon and the Goddess of Wisdom. No grades, no rolls, no late policies for papers overdue. Simply the pursuit and love of wisdom. Philosophy. He looked out a classroom window at the green quadrangle and the trees in stately dignity. The streets and walks were fresh with a summer shower. He imagined a boy with his cap turned backwards practicing a pitch. A father catching, giving advice, not a word of which was lost on the boy. He had forgotten how painful memories could be.

Two weeks later she showed up at his office door. He was well aware of her better than average wardrobe, but today she had really turned herself into a work of art. He guessed that she had been to see the department head. It seemed that whenever girls—or women—went to complain to one's department head, they always dressed to kill.

"Come in. Sit down."

She started to push the door closed behind her.

"No, please," he said, motioning about the door.

"The door? You don't want me to . . . "

"No . . . People will say we're in love." As in the last time he had seen her in class, he thought she blushed slightly, and he wondered if that last phrase would come back to haunt him.

She situated herself in the chair before his desk and reached forward—perhaps as an instinctual response—to pick up a statue of Don

Quxiote which had been lying broken on his desk almost as long as he had had it. His son had been careless. The keepsake from Madrid had been broken off at the knees. Jean-Paul actually liked it better this way.

"What happened to your statue?" she asked, laying him back down carefully.

"Blind sighted—no doubt by a colleague. I keep that as a reminder. That's what happens to romantics," he said, as though she should take special caution.

She was mute for a moment. She didn't get it. Meanwhile Jean-Paul sized her up from her appearance and the non-verbal cues. Upper-middle class. Has no idea what her father really goes through for a living or how much he makes. Her sorority necklace invited acquaintances to say hello and scared away the riff-raff. The fraternity pin suggested an upper-middle class merger in the making. What did she know of real life—of suffering? He had some acquaintance. Would she ever know? Perhaps, to be fair, but life wasn't even fair in its unfairness. "Do you know who Mother Teresa is?"

"Who?"

"Nothing—just wondering. So, what can I do *to* you," he said, another intentional gaffe. He realized that he really must get hold of that sort of thing.

"I'm sorry I walked out of class. I want to apologize."

"Forget it. Everybody's touchy. It's people who don't care who are easy going. I expect it. In fact, if I'm not upsetting students, I don't feel like I'm getting anywhere."

She was pleased to see he wasn't sore, wasn't going to dock her grade—didn't even take attendance for that matter. She cleared her voice. "Why did you ask me to take this class?"

Jean-Paul had completely forgotten. "What?"

"You told me to take this class last year, and I was wondering why?"

That's right. He remembered now their first meeting. He had served as a judge for the college poetry contest. She had come to thank him for awarding her a first place and to ask him about her submission. It wasn't enough, he thought at the time, for her to win first place, she wanted to have her poetry critiqued as though it were *The Waste Land* or *In Memoriam.* It was poetical, he had said, and it was. Her meter was actual, her rhymes had not relied on the you-too-blue formulas. "You know, this is pretty good Victorian stuff," he had said in complimenting her, though he did not, in fact, think much of the Victorians. Whenever he read Tennyson, or Swinburne, or the Rossettis—especially the Rossettis—he thought of cream-filled chocolates wrapped up in foil. He remembered a few lines in fact, not because he had wanted too, but he had had to read a passage at the awards ceremony, and like a jingle it

wouldn't go away.

We are but young trees in winter,
Our shrouds are gray and white.
We cannot warmth or shelter give
Nor are our fruits yet ripe.

And so forth and so forth, and then a melodramatic concluding stanza.

And those who cannot sleep must die.
We ask ourselves, "But why, but why?"
And have but echoes for reply.
And have but echoes for reply.

Nice use of a repeated line there, he had said, because her closing plea was itself an echo. He remembered little else, but he liked the poem's despondency. He wondered now how a student who wrote nihilistic verse then could write miraculous stories now. She had been flattered and had asked about creative writing classes—he had recommended his own.

"I thought you could benefit from the class, I suppose."

"Is that all?" she asked.

"Well, I'm always looking out for clever students—for my classes."

"I don't feel very clever." He didn't know what to say. "In fact, you haven't said one positive thing about my work all term, and every time I make a comment in class, you say the opposite. So, I was wondering why you wanted me in your class at all."

Why do kids put everything on a personal level? he wondered. He wasn't a Happy Haven camp counselor. Still, he realized that the personal touch was perhaps the quickest way to be rid of her, so he said, "If I didn't care . . ." (he searched for her name) "Jennifer . . . I wouldn't criticize you. I'd just simply patronize you at your own level. Don't you see, if I didn't think you were capable of much better, criticism wouldn't just be a waste of time, it'd be a cruel joke."

She smiled and apologized again for missing class.

A few days later, she returned, a manuscript under her arm.

"I've thought about what you've been saying this term, and I have really taken it to heart."

Yeah, I'll bet, he thought.

"I've rewritten my story. Would you look at it?"

"Right now?"

She nodded and handed him the revision.

A Visit with Eternity
by
Jennifer Harris

The child studied ants. There was an ant colony on the edge of the asphalt drive and on many a summer afternoon she would sit beside them. They'd usually be out in force, like the campsite of a huge archaeological dig, and she would let them crawl on her hands, so as to get a better look at them. She loved the ants, even when one would get past and bite her on that sensitive exposed calf between her low socks and her jumper.

But her pride and joy was her ant farm which she had begun in an empty two-liter Coke bottle. She learned to gently pick up the ants and drop them into the mouth of the bottle neck. She would give them three inches of dirt, green grasshoppers—living and dead—scoops of sugar. Sometimes she would cause wars by dropping red ants into the middle of a black ant colony. Other times she would give them earthquakes by shaking the bottle—but never floods. Floods, she knew, were dangerous and would destroy the colony. But she truly loved them, and they were truly amazing.

Then one day as she was walking home, slashing the high weeds with a makeshift sword of tree branch, she noticed the green freckled salamander basking on a rock beside the irrigation ditch her brothers called Green Snake River. She rarely was allowed to observe them, noisy as she was even for a little girl. In the past she had rarely seen more than a colorful dart, a swishing pair of legs.

But this salamander seemed not oblivious, but indifferent to her approach. It was as though the creature were some imperious reptile, a dinosaur sunning itself on a cliff above a mighty river. Stepping carefully on the thick, damp weeds, like a figure in slow motion, she plodded nearer. She was within several feet of it. Cautiously she got even nearer; holding her breath, she now could see its marble-like, lidless red eyes, its thin skin expanding and deflating along its torso like a big vacuum, its spiky fingers. It blinked twice and cocked its head, but did it see her? It was as if it wanted her to reach out and touch it. It was an enchanted prince, she thought. She was now within a yard of it, and she placed her soggy wet sneaker on a slimy green rock. In the next moment she felt the earth slip and her weightless flesh swallowed in cold water. The amphibian, too, catapulted from the bank at the child's sudden fall. Water slapped both banks violently and a filmy cloud of mud floated up to the surface of the lapping water. Skipping diagonally between the banks just below the surface, the salamander eventually squatted atop the child's shoulder blades who now floated face down like a lily pad.

Well, this was certainly better, Jean-Paul thought. A bit too much

modification for his taste but very visual. He still wasn't clear as to how this would tie in to the central experience. But he looked up at her and smiled. "This story's better. It makes me want to read more."

She pulled her knees up to her chin. She was a pill bug, she imagined, and a golden string drew her along. But she didn't know where. It was dark. She was alone. Then she felt her grandfather's chubby cat Ptolemy rubbing his ribs and tail against her, purring with pleasure. And then her Grandma picked her up, and they were sitting all three of them in the house she had visited for every summer until this last. Grandma on the overstuffed couch with its hand-crocheted doilies, Grandpa in his reclining vinyl chair, his belly out in front of him like his mother's last pregnancy, one leg straddling the arm rest.

Jean-Paul liked the cat best. Ptolemy was an inventive choice of names. But the family, he was sure, would be pure Norman Rockwell. But then again Jennifer might have posed for the immortalizer of New England blandness. He preferred his families ethnic. Old country Italian—though that too was a cliché.

They had not seen her in so long, Grandmother said, and kissed and stroked her hair and then pulled from one of her many apron pockets a bar of black Switzer's licorice.

Grandfather, still pigeon-toed, seemed well pleased as he stood, shuffled off through an archway into the yellow kitchen. He returned in a moment with his board of Chinese Checkers and the tin cookie box in which he had always kept the marbles.

The child slipped off Grandma's lap onto the floor and pried the lid open. Rattling around inside were the marbles, just as she had remembered them. Some were clear with colored chevrons and eyeballs in the centers, others were swirled with many different colors; some, like pictures she had seen of distant planets, had Martian canals of color.

And she remembered the board—the black metal edge, the purple Chinese dragons in two corners, the fat yellow Buddhas in the other two, the five-pointed star in the center with the marble-holes. She loved to play Chinese Checkers with Grandpa and had missed these moments the most. They set up their marbles, and as always Grandpa let her go first and still counted the holes with his crooked index finger which he had broken as a young man but had never had set.

"My, but haven't you grown—hasn't she grown up, Grandpa?" Grandma said, and smiled with her dentures which the little girl had never really liked. They were too perfect, the teeth too big. Grandma hardly ever wore them, the child recalled, except when company was coming over because they hurt her gums so much. "I remember when you was just an itty-bitty thing and now look at you," she went on, and the child beamed with pride for having grown so big.

"Growing like a weed," Grandpa said, and he'd continue moving his marbles out across the board, setting up trails for his other marbles to jump, checking for the spaces—because his eyes were foggy with cataracts—with his crooked finger. They played three games, and she won twice and might have won a third game had Ptolemy not jumped up on the footstool between them and upset the board. They asked her about her mother and father and sisters and brothers. She also told them about her favorite bugs.

Then Grandpa relaxed back in his chair and looked stern. "You shouldn't play with bugs."

"But why, Grandpa?"

"They don't like it."

"Oh, yes they do," she said anxiously. She hated it when Grandpa disapproved of anything she did.

"No, they don't. They've got things to do, more important things to do than to let you put them in jars and such, and Grandma and I want you to stop. Darling, you're killing them."

She put the marbles away carefully and crawled back up on the couch and nudged her grandmother. To escape her grandfather's stare, she searched the pockets of Grandma's apron, finding the buttons and earrings and the letters she would respond to after her soaps were over. Grandma hugged her close and pulled on the back of her hair and told her they'd have to change her name to Georgie Porgie if her mother didn't let her hair grow. But she still could not meet her grandfather's gaze, and she thought of the ant colony in the garage and the fights she had witnessed, looking down with new shame and horror through the bottleneck like the eye of heaven, the bugs she had seen killing each other, the giant winged insect limping up and down in circles, trying to escape, but being eventually overcome by the red ants and how they curled up and stung it and tore it apart. Then Grandma asked her if she was crying, and she said she wanted to go home.

Grandpa and Grandma looked wistfully at one another. She was on a hospital stretcher. Her mother and father were hugging her, and the attending physician declared it was a miracle.

Drowned children simply do not resuscitate after an hour and certainly not without brain damage. The case was actually written up and found its way into journals of medicine and popular science.

Home again, she ran at once into the garage and emptied the ant farm. Her face inches from the soil, she spread the dirt out with her hands and searched for life among the transparent wings, twin bits, and pebbles.

Jean-Paul put the story down. It was a nice little bit of work. "You worked very hard on this, didn't you?"

She nodded. "For two weeks—every night."

"It shows." Then he paused. He was surprised that she had talent.

Gratified even. He wanted to tell her so—and more, that it had moved him. But he also wanted to gut the story like a trout for what it was trying to do to the reader. He decided to approach bearing gifts. "I like what you've done with the characterization."

"Yes, well, I cut some of the parts out that weren't as important."

"Like the Jesus in the white robe?"

"You didn't like it, and I decided that it was sort of beside the point."

"Yes, exactly. The business with the Chinese checkers is really creative. The Switzer's licorice. The crooked index finger."

Jennifer shook her head, "That's just the way I remember my grandparents," she said, dismissing her imaginative gifts.

Yes, imagination is memory, he wanted to tell her. Jean-Paul leaned back and wondered if the boy who fondled her breasts would realize the potential for delight from her brain. Then he thought of John Keats—for some reason—and the poet's love for Fanny Braun, his coughing up blood and his suffocating in his own phlegm, his Greek urn, Jennifer's ant farm, a Chinese checker board laid out like the universe with planets for marbles, things of beauty, and beauties that must die. He marvelled at the girl before him. She had survived childhood while others hadn't, but what if she had died? What if she had died too? She cleared her throat, and he returned from his reverie and began a well rehearsed little speech.

"Jennifer, let me just say something though." She sat upright as if to take dictation. "You can do anything in fiction . . . but be dishonest. Do you know what I mean? Does that sound like a paradox—not being dishonest in something called 'fiction'?"

She agreed and moved a little closer to the desk.

"I write fiction. My stories are lies. Sometimes things in the stories resemble things that have really happened, sometimes not, but the given factualness doesn't matter because they are true to life. Not true in fact, but true to life. Know what I mean? Maybe Mabel doesn't exist and hence can't really first detect her husband's infidelities by smelling his clothes, but somewhere, some woman has done just that. Get it? Now let's take this story you've written. Of course, it's fiction—I expected that, but it isn't true." Jean-Paul looked into her eyes and saw nothing that he could interpret. "Let's face it, children don't drown and then come back to life. I wish it were true, but it isn't."

"But it does happen," she asserted.

"No. Not really, and they don't see Jesus and visit with Grandma and Gramps. Just look at me and listen. You're an English major, how many times have you read about this or anything like this in your modern lit classes? How many? Even once? Why is that? The idea's not that original. It's because great literature is about being true to life. Life is rough, kid, it's one animal eating another. It's about pain, suffering—unhappy end-

ings. Sure, there's the other stuff, and we call them fairy tales, and we read them to children. But life is tragic, and until you're willing to accept that, you're writing will go nowhere. What are you thinking?"

She reached again for his Don Quixote and rubbed its legs between her fingers. "You don't seem to understand . . . "

"But I do understand. I used to be where you are, but you know what happened? Experience."

She tried to object to this, but he cut her off. What could she say, after all. "Yes, I know, Jennifer, but that's not literature; that's religion and religion isn't literature. Let me put it to you this way. Okay, in your story, God returns this one little child to life because, as you say, 'her mission wasn't yet accomplished.' What about all the little children who do die? Have you been to a children's hospital lately? Check out the burn treatment ward. It might surprise you. What about the thousands of children who went into the Nazi gas chambers? Haven't you heard of them? Did even one of them ever come back alive? Don't you see, beauty, love, truth, they come to nothing—yes, yes, they start out well enough, I too remember how they start out well enough, but I never saw a flower that didn't fade, a truth that wasn't twisted, a love—ah love—that wasn't betrayed and turned to woe and bitter poison for the heart."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she stammered.

"Right." He understood what she was saying. His scope was too grand. He was vague, historical, or literary. He had been reaching at the easiest allusions with which to communicate his belief that the world was firmly in the grip of sadistic and jealous powers. He swiveled sideways in his chair and faced his office window. Again he viewed the college quadrangle, though this time from another angle. "Okay, okay," he said and thought if she really wants to open that door, let's open it, let's get a little dirt under our spiritual toenails, let's take a trip to the basement. "Let me tell you about my own child—my son. He was asthmatic. On his eleventh birthday he went to a party and ate something to which he was allergic. I rushed him to a doctor—it was only two doors away and while the doctor prepared an antihistamine, my son collapsed—all he needed was a little oxygen, that's all. No miracle cures, no acts of heroism of my part, just a little oxygen. His throat had swollen closed. But he might still have been saved by the injection had it not been for his contractions. Even as the needle penetrated his forearm, his convulsions started. My son vomited birthday cake into his lungs. There was no saving him, no resuscitation. You think I'm angry about that? You think I'm bitter? I'm damned bitter!"

Although the anecdote had its desired effect, Jean-Paul felt some disgust for having to reach into his private life—and the most painful moment in his private life for illustration. Also, he was a bit ashamed, even

anxious.

Jean-Paul was afraid that she would ask if the story about his son was the "truth" or merely "literary truth." He had, in fact, embellished it: he had not been present when his son had died, though he had imagined it so often, pictured it so vividly, that for all intents and purposes, he was there. "I'm sorry about your child . . . but I feel like you're taking it out on me," she said finally.

"Every time I hear one of these miraculous stories, every time someone gives me an unnatural, incredible, ridiculously happy ending, I think of my son, Byron, and what a sham it is for some people to pretend that life is some sort of musical comedy. This world isn't a playground, it's a charnel house and sooner or later, someone, something—fate, God, or the devil—will put a meat hook through your heart. You'll see. I'm not a great believer in the concept of moral fiction, but I'll tell you what I think immoral fiction is: it's lying about how really sadistic life is!"

Jean-Paul paused to breathe and restore his composure. Then he picked up her story and extended it to her. "Like I said, it's a nice piece of work—but it isn't fiction, it's fantasy."

But the student didn't receive it from his hand. Rather she put down her books and leaning forward towards the desk, fumbled with the first two buttons on her blouse. "I want to show you something," she said, and Jean-Paul thought, "Oh God, she's taking off her blouse. It would be a strange moment for a solicitation, but he had come to expect the unexpected over the years. "Listen, please," Jean-Paul said, getting to his feet, his hands lifted as though to raise a barrier between them.

Her eyes were flooding, the skin of her pale neck was blotching red before his eyes. "Here, look at this. Do you see this?" and here she indicated a spot with her index finger.

Jean-Paul looked and saw a scar at the base of her neck. It was like a sliver of moon, the edge of an axe, one lip smiling, a worm burrowed below the skin. It sickened him to think of its incision, the blood, truer than paint, the most precious of liquids, pulsing up, wasting in the air, corroding almost immediately into rust. But he also saw in the scar the vitality of recovery, the momentary triumph of life.

And at that moment, even in her case, he realized that there is hardly a life that goes by uncontested and unblemished. He faced this every day now, though he knew not where his strength came from. He would have traded his life, his wife's too—though not hers alone—to see the same healing mark on Byron's throat.

"This is where they did the tracheotomy when I was six."

"What are you saying?" Jean-Paul asked, already realizing what she had said not just now but in her "story." He leaned forward, his palms on his paper–strewn desk, gazing at the scar, wanting to touch it, doubting

even this, but somehow wanting to believe. But did he dare believe it?

"What I'm saying is you're right; my story isn't fiction—it happened to me . . . Now are you telling me that I can't write about it—or that I can write about it—like a fairy tale—but that it'll never be great literature because it doesn't conform to your ideas about life?"

Jean-Paul leaned back in his chair and had to consider. Is that what he was saying?