

## The Elements of Style

Story by Allison Fine

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*For John on his 30<sup>th</sup> Birthday*

*A form of enlightenment is that you will never feel at home in the world and you are not meant to.*

*-David Whyte*

*The simplest questions take the longest to answer.*

*Buddhism is not a religion it is a science of mind.*

*-The Dali Llama*

*You only understand your conversation through exile.*

*-David Whyte*

*How imprisoning the word "mother" is for a mother.*

*-David Whyte*

As a child Whiting whined a lot. His name was Alexander Whiting but no one called him Alexander because he hated it, not the name, exactly, but the fact that he shared it with a bunch of ancestors he despised. His father, his grandfather, his great-great grandfather; his great- great-great grandfather--he was the V and the mere mention of it made him angry.

He demanded his mother stop calling him "Five" or "Junior," but especially not Alexander, as she did in a certain tone when she was angry; a tone which had all the vowels of her Eastern upbringing, "Alexannnduh....!" No, he would not be that name or follow in those footsteps, even if it meant doors would open for him. The corridors of power always made him sick. Even as a young child he was remarkably aware of the inequality of life all around him. There were the

servers and *the served*. Something intrinsically fair-minded about Whiting did not like this one bit.

So he became Whiting quite early on in school. He insisted on it. He went to the Country Day alongside a cluster of other kids much like him with long names and pedigrees they didn't comprehend but were only too quick to brag about, even at age five or six. Some of the more indoctrinated, the kids who talked about their fathers reading them the Wall Street Journal at breakfast, enjoyed this little kid from a very rich family like theirs who had the guts to stand up and take an ironic stance. At age seven or eight it wouldn't have been defined as ironic, but Whiting had that capacity early on—probably a hangover from a previous life.

They were all from rich families, what could they do? Hanging over their heads like Damocles' sword was Tolstoy: "*happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way..*," and, indeed, it did seem as if this group of kids were exceedingly happy, although they did not understand why. The encoding of the wealthy class produced an odd sort of conformity. The children bought it when they were told how lucky they were to be rich and privileged. In this way those youngsters were deprived of the right to generational gaps or rebellion—how can you rebel when everyone tells you how happy you are and you begin to believe it? Deprived of the right to complain or be unhappy, they wandered along prescribed pathways, reassured by the smiles and nods of all the adults around them.

This dis-connect between what they were told and the reality of what they actually experienced and felt about this experience, confused them. This bewilderment they hid, buried under all sorts of competitive behavior, mannerisms and bluff.

*What do you have to unhappy about?* Adults would ask them. *You have everything! Stop complaining! Think of the poor unfortunate children in (China, Turkey, Syria, Greece—whatever country was in vogue for poverty at the time)! You have more than they do!* Not much was said about giving back in this club, although the unspoken transmission was that just by being wealthy and producing something other people could pay for was in its own way, *giving back*.

In this fashion the wealthy parents of the wealthy children of this particular group inculcated a guilt complex, not about being rich, but about having any complaints about life whatsoever. Everything was hunky dory. Everything would always be hunky dory, even if it was not; because, after all, distraction was always around the next corner.

The assumption was that money alleviated all things, including suffering and pain.

The misperception between text and subtext lurked in the background radiation of their lives much like the ominous Cosmic background left over from an early stage in the development of the universe.

Whiting wondered (much later on in life) if Tolstoy had got this family thing all wrong.

*Are happy families all alike? What if all families are really unhappy families, and in that case, by our unhappiness we are bound together until we all join the Board of Directors of whatever company our fathers and mothers serve, or some of us work for the companies that our fathers and mothers own, yet there is no difference! Every family is miserable and by our misery we are placed side by side in the human endeavor, vibrating and singing and crying in and out of tune, much like the gut strings on a guitar, and at any time those strings can snap and break sending individuals, like strings, hurling out of the clutches of the illusionary protectiveness of wealth and privilege into the nasty, unknowable grasp of a world that hates us!*

These thoughts plagued Whiting.

But that was a long time ago.

*The world has evolved up or down, (Whiting surmised back then, long ago), and began to love the rich and hate the poor. Oh! The thought suddenly occurred, but what about Jesus's sayings about the poor—the meek shall inherit the earth, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven etc etc etc? They have always hated the poor! They have always hated the rich! They hate the rich; they hate the poor. I am doomed!*

He often had this thought, the thought of being totally useless and doomed, and thus he sought relief from this thought but unfortunately the ordinary forms of relief, such as spending and traveling and girls and sex did not

really appease him. He had a guilty conscience, but what on earth for? What was he guilty of? And of course he had no role models for guilt in his family since everyone did exactly what they wanted without considering the feelings of others anyway.

When he was a young child, running, swimming, playing and being ironic seemed enough. As he grew older he realized much more: *style without substance*, he thought, *how boring*. And thus at age sixteen he felt the world shrink.

*Have they always hated the poor?* "They" being the world, he thought, although Whiting assumed this without having to explain it to himself. His inner turmoil and monologue went on and on ceaselessly, seemingly without him. There were some mornings when he might wake in the midst of a monologue that had been going on while he slept and he had no idea which side of the conversation he was on.

*Have they always hated the poor?* Whiting's other self chimed in a second time, just to be sure he got the point and pursued the discussion. *Yes, yes!* He would yell back at the consciousness impatiently. In order to simplify things, he began to call them *Whiting Black* and *Whiting White*, a simplistic reference that enabled him to take sides with himself if he so chose, or remain neutral.

It was only later in life that he began to ask himself, *but who is the **he** that is taking sides or remaining neutral? Is there a third Whiting somewhere?* This question, in the form of a kind of *Zen Koan*, he posed to the various teachers he

encountered along his quest, at a much later date of course. The teachers he encountered always smiled, laughed and told him to continue to ponder the answer.

He never once considered that any of this meant he was crazy.

There was plenty of crazy in the Whiting family and his irony kept him from going down that road.

So the *Third Whiting*, or *The Observer*, as he began to call him, surveyed the dialectic inside of his mind and quite enjoyed watching the polarization between White and Black arise.

After the revelation on Jesus's teachings on the poor, which instigated a rather lively altercation between Whiting White and Whiting Black, Black suddenly jumped in: *Come on, you're not religious. You have no religion! Buddhism is not a religion! It's a meditation on meditation! When do you remember Church, for God's sake?*

True, Whiting's family was both a-religious and atheist, not counting IV's sudden conversion just before he died, but they did go to the Christ's Church at 2 Rectory Road sporadically: (Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday), with the Reverend James Marshfield, also a curate, performing the Eucharist. Everyone knew the family—it was not an anomaly or anything like that. And his mother, Vivian, loved the kinds of clothes she could get to wear exclusively to Church; patent leather black heels, pencil skirts with tight sweaters hitting at just the sweet spot of her waist, expensive bracelets IV gave her and a touch of pearls in a strand at her

neck set off pointedly by tiny little pearl drop earrings on the lobes of her tiny little pink ears.

They never attended at Christmas, (too cold), but many other times when Vivian felt guilty or IV was bored with being at home on Sunday they'd drag the brood into Christ's Church where Whiting would sit with the other kids at the Sunday school, listening to stories he half remembered.

But that was a long time ago.

What Whiting's classmates admired most about him was that he never had to buck the system and yet he could always do what he wanted. But they also would do what they wanted, only in a much different way.

They did that much, much later.

At age five or six, Whiting was skinny and could run very fast without hiccupping and in addition he could read and write and do the numbers with recklessness thanks to his older brother Tom who had been coaching him since before he could even walk. While still in the crib Tom recited the times tables and read Ovid to Whiting, who obviously couldn't understand a word, but it must have sunk it somewhere.

"Love and dignity cannot share the same abode," he often quoted to Whiting, who, from babyhood on, looked up to Tom as a kind of God. At age three Whiting asked "why not," at hearing this often repeated quote, and Tom looked at him with complete disdain.

"Why not!" Tom yelled. "Why not, not?"

“Oh, OK, why not, not?”

“Oh forget it, V, you’ll never understand. Love strips away all dignity. You are naked in front of your loved one and she can see everything, all of you who you are, your faults, your stupid made up lies, the rationales you tell yourself and others—you can’t be dignified in front of someone who can see right through you!”

Whiting still did not understand.

Tom was referring to Katherine who had marched into his life, given him a total bath in sado-masochistic love play and marched out.

Tom was his father’s child from a first marriage where the wife died suddenly and there was Alexander Whiting IV with a son and no wife or mother for his child, and IV had a business to run.

The global processes of exploration, extraction, refining, transporting and marketing petroleum products was not just a mandate or an inheritance to Whiting IV, it was a religious mission. Regional consumers in south and central America were an untapped resource and long before others would see the brilliance of his move, he was deploying economic hit men to go down to South America to secure oil rich land by enslaving the indigenous population to economic hardship and debt for multiple lifetimes. Deposing dictators that did not go along with his policy and the policy of the American government, whom he served and who (really) served him, (IV felt so compunction about this)—IV knew with absolute certainty that his mission was to carry on the inherited

business and wealth of Whiting Gas and Oil. As he often told his shareholders, the importance of Petroleum in an unrefined state, utilized by humans for over 5000 years, was the god given resource of Whiting Gas and Oil in order to build an evolving world economy.

From Eisenhower to Kennedy to Johnson to Nixon to Ford to Carter to Reagan (the best of the bunch!) right through Bush, Clinton, and the disappointing son of Bush, until he died in the first year of Obama's administration, Whiting played in the background, one of the Illuminati that pulled strings no one even knew existed.

And then along came Vivian! (Carter administration). Spectacular, much younger than IV, a graduate of Vassar and extremely full of all kinds of strange ideas about sex, men and women, she was a child of the sixties and Alex IV found that inviting, so in 1970 at age sixty he married this girl of thirty-three. They had three more children, Maureen, Napoleon ("Nappy") and then little Alexander. When Whiting came along Tom was already thirty-two, graduate of Harvard and on his way to University of Southern California to do his doctorate in Cognitive Therapy. He was to study with Dr. Roger Ellis, an Irish guy from Trinity College and all was set to launch Tom onto the world where he found out years later that cognitive therapy was totally passé and had been taken over by Neuro-engineering.

But that was later.

Tom also to learned what hatred of his father really was, admitted that he wished him dead most of his life, and then, after completing his doctorate and getting all set to practice in San Diego at U.C. San Diego, he suffered a depression so debilitating it forced him to be institutionalized and only after twenty rounds of electric shock treatment and two years of living in and out of a straight jacket in a padded room, was he able to walk upright and look past two inches in front of him to resume his career again. He was considered a success story because no one thought he would snap out of it, but Vivian watched over him like a hawk and demanded after only ten ECT's that he needed more! More! And more he got. It took twenty to finally clear out the cobwebs and enable him to see straight again.

But that was later.

In order to keep himself upright and able he found alcohol. The truth was he had never left it since he had started drinking from IV's office bar down the hall from his bedroom at age eleven. But the aftermath of the mental institution experience scarred him beyond repair—he felt alcohol gave him the grounding he needed to continue therapeutic practice, write and publish papers, get married, have no children, get divorced, get married again, have no children and drink himself into an extremely uncharted *muddle age*, as he liked to call it.

But that was later.

So it was Tom, then Maureen, then Whiting, then Nappy. Maureen was the eldest of Vivian's three but she did not take the matter seriously. Being the oldest just meant she gave herself permission to be cruel when she felt like it and mostly unavailable for anything else. They had a full time Nanny/Housekeeper, Gloria, from East Syracuse, who lived in the small house on the grounds with her husband and a mutt dog named Harry. Gloria had way too much to do to keep the house up with all the constant dirt and debris and changes, so the children were basically left to raise themselves, although Vivian did provide plenty of food and excursions and outings and someone was always there watching them swim in the ocean outside their door, just in case someone drowned. IV warned that if a child of his drowned he would kill himself and the rest of the family.

Gloria went with the family back to Manhattan for the winter. In that case her husband, Jake, stayed on at the Narragansett manse and took care of things, whatever that meant. Harry stayed too. The apartment in Manhattan was also big so Gloria's projects often involved copious amounts of dusting, sweeping and working things out with Vivian and Whiting. It was Whiting who planned the menus, even as a small boy, and from eight on he cooked everything, however Vivian felt Gloria ought to "oversee" just in case. Whiting resented it.

One would think cooking for a family of five was a simple matter, but it was not.

Every one of the Whitings had dietary quirks.

More on that later but not here.

“That means Vivian and Gloria, too? You’re going to murder them too?”

Whiting asked of his father one hot August day, when IV expressed concern over the drowning issue. They’d left Manhattan for the beach manse and the summer lingered on and on, as his childhood summers always did.

“And in that order, dad? You first and then the other two?” He was trying to trap his father but IV wasn’t playing.

“Of course not me first, V. What kind of fool do you think I am?”

That was pretty much the extent of his relationship to his father. However, Whiting was the forgiving sort and did not hold it against him. In fact, as a child he thought he loved IV dearly and could find him quite charming. He never got very close to him but just watching him from a distance was all the storyline he needed. Eventually he realized how much he actually hated IV.

But that was later.

As a baby, Whiting perplexed his mother and made her feel very, very, small and confused and often angry, which was extremely easy to do because she was mad all the time anyway, however she never openly showed how mad she was with her sons because they were her little men, her little prides and joys or whatever. Except Maureen, who was very fat from day one and stayed fat her whole life, and at whom Vivian scowled and bellowed and laughed and hooted

and shamed constantly right down to the ground. Maureen was not her pride and joy.

Napoleon (this unfortunate name was IV's idea) who never got called anything but Nappy, was such a little darling and so clever and cute and funny and destined to become the most awful boring self righteous asshole, showed a talent for poetry as a child and then he grew up to be a lawyer.

Nevertheless, Nappy was her favorite, her baby. Whiting made her mad, mad, mad and she glorified it and wallowed in it and allowed herself instantaneous and awful tantrums which she blamed on Whiting, and often took to her bed with a joint, (because of Whiting, of course) which she called an "occasional cigarette," although Tom explained to Maureen, Nappy and Whiting that this was not a real cigarette but something much deeper, darker and more scary. He did that to scare them because he also stole some of her occasional cigarettes for himself.

So it was nigh onto 2000, when Whiting was twenty-nine and going through what Maureen called his "first Saturn Return," (she started studying astrology when she was ten, and got very, very serious about it quickly) that Whiting discovered he had a way with men, (not sexually), and women—people generally—and that this talent for charming people into doing what he wanted was his real flair. Some people might call his ability a tad manipulative, but Whiting was too hopeful to be a manipulator—he just knew how to smile and please and go along with the program.

With men, he could be bitter and sweet; caustic and acute, thus making the guys laugh and stop being jealous of him. They were then quite eager to hand him things, (later it was money and cars and high end jobs), when he was younger it was attention and a slight hint of obsequiousness. Women often behaved slightly stupid around him, or they tried too hard to be brave and courageous just to show him how important they were, so in the end, he found he could do whatever he wanted with just about anyone.

Tom at this point was well into his mid-fifties, had already suffered his first heart attack and was cruising on toward his second. He did not disrespect Whiting out of love but he also did not fawn all over him either. He lectured him incessantly about the wages of sin, although he never put it that way, hoping that Whiting could extrapolate and develop some kind of conscience. When Tom went away to the mental institution, Whiting at first felt let down, then disappointed, then angry, then indifferent.

Tom's lectures always included his beloved Ovid, although later on, just before his break down, Camus crept in. Whiting saw right through it.

"Do not wait for the last judgment, it's taking place everyday," Tom said after his first heart attack. Whiting thought it was out of character and he said so.

"No," said Tom, "it is the new character unfolding in me."

"It's just that you've been sick and people get pessimistic when they get sick," Tom said. He was lying on the chaise lounge on the patio at the latest gut and rehab at the Narragansett manse. Vivian had spent the better part of a

decade designing, redesigning, tearing up and putting back together the enormous house with a private pool and a fountain and facing the Atlantic. She drove the family completely crazy, well actually, the children didn't much mind but IV loved order and clean lines and discipline and one late spring IV got pneumonia and told her he'd cut her completely out of his will if she did not stop. So, she left the house where it was at this point, half done from its third or fourth reincarnation, and took up golf and stocks, gold and jewelry making.

Maureen appeared happy as a fish swimming in shark infested waters. She didn't really have the right to complain. She shut herself up in the upper part of the house studying the charts of everyone in the family and endeavoring to find transits or aspects indicating something awful would happen to someone. In due time awful things happened to everyone but she didn't understand this as a child.

She hated the debris and mess, although Whiting was good at ignoring it. The imminent chaos threatened to confuse and confound anyone who tried navigating from the two living rooms, filled with various levels of building debris, to a bedroom or one of several dens and the so-called library with 5,000 books in piles all around the floor; the cavernous kitchen with cupboards from the 30's to one of the six bathrooms all in need of something or other. One bathroom had a sink but no working toilet, one had a toilet and a bath but no sink or shower, one had everything but the ceiling was cracked and shavings of plaster or whatever it was rained down on the head of whomever was shitting or bathing there.

And other bathrooms were hidden away on the third floor where no one hardly ever went because Maureen had set up her Astrology practice there and held what Tom called séances.

“People don’t do séances anymore Tom!” she blasted at him one day. The ocean was roaring in, Maureen checked her ephemeris and had mildly predicted tsunami but it never came, and IV was trying to relax before going back into the city and his office.

After he passed the bar, Nappy had an office not far from his father’s, where his specialty was derivatives and he had cooked up some marvelous investments that no one could trace in a million years, bundling them up like Tarot cards wrapped in velvet, with all sorts of mergers, and banks and investors nobody heard of.

But that was later, of course.

“So what’s going on up there?” Nappy asked Maureen.

“We’re into self actualization—astrology, psychology and the therapeutic process!”

“Bullshit!”

Whiting would be in the kitchen cooking when these discussions started, but his momentum stopped repeatedly on numerous occasions by these outbursts from his siblings. He hated to admit that he might be emotionally fragile. In a family of tough hides, this would be construed as a weakness.

He loved to cook when Vivian was out with her stock club girls or jewelry making with Roger Handover—the twenty-two year old owner of *Vogue Beads* in Narragansett-town. She had been frolicking with him for a year or so. It was 2000 and she had it in her to be a newly reinvented Madonna. Pre-Cougar, she was, perhaps, in the vanguard of creating the new version of the old version people used to call Gigolo and Old Rich Woman.

*Dumb Old Rich Woman* thought Whiting but he never said so.

Maureen had never married. She weighed 300 pounds. She might have had some affairs with women but when Vivian questioned her Maureen hissed and made faces that brought up grief and disgust in Vivian—it made her nauseous to think of Maureen as not being *quite normal* as she put it, but of course, Maureen was in her own weird way, the most normal of the lot. And Vivian, despite her liberal education, was a homophobe, although she never would have put it that way.

Vivian's goal was to love Maureen totally, embrace their differences and use her as an object of total and non-judgmental compassionate practice, but she never got there.

Maureen ever fully launched an independent life until much later. She stayed at the *Unfinished Garage*, as the family had begun to call the house ten years earlier, a perfect waste of \$10,000,000 IV ranted (until he turned 80 and seemed to barely notice what was going on around him), although he was sharp enough to call the brokers and manage his funds every day, all year round.

In the winter some of the family went back to the townhouse in Central Park West, and others holed up at the manse in R.H. Late spring and most of summer; even part of fall, found the family clumped peevishly all together at the manse, pretending to love one another, pretending to hate one another, and generally creating a great deal of suffering all around.

Maureen became the household eccentric in a house of oddballs: a resident who lived off the family money and did astrology readings to locals and tourists. Inherited wealth does strange things to various people. The interaction between money you don't have to work for and lots of time and space can produce unconventionalities that our culture sorely needs.

By this time IV was croaking around well into his 80's and trying to hold down a conversation that didn't end with him asking "what?" seven times. IV was soon to enter the domain of being termed a "National Treasure."

Whiting became a Buddhist when he worked for the Peace Corps in Myanmar, Burma in 2005. He was thirty-three, a terrible age to do something so foolish, Maureen told him.

"Christ died for our sins at that age," she told him. They were in the dining room looking at the large serving dish of boiled fish and potatoes Vivian had set before them. It was ugly and it was lunch and neither of them wanted to eat it, but Maureen always had a thing for not wanting to hurt the feelings of both the food and the cook, so she ate everything.

Whiting could only last in the Peace Corps for six months. He contracted dysentery and lost seventy pounds. They shipped him back in a cargo plane, out of Myanmar, spit him out onto the runway at Kennedy Airport clutching a face towel smelling of lemon grass and there was Vivian staring down at his emaciated form splayed out on a stretcher. They put him into Presbyterian hospital where Great Uncle Harry, chief of residents, oversaw his care and made sure he treatment was the best money and reputation could buy. In two weeks, discharged and alarmingly reed thin, Whiting came home to rest. Within a month he declared his desire to study Eastern Religion at the University of California Berkley.

His then girlfriend, Willa, a beautiful girl from Atlanta, who had also been in the Peace Corps, but made it through the two year requirement, was at Berkley doing her PhD in Linguistics and told him he would live in a house with her and several others and “rebuild his life.” This kind of take-charge approach was something Whiting was used to, especially when it came to women, and at dinner one evening, while pushing food around his plate, he declared his intentions to the family.

Whiting had no problem getting in—his former grades had been excellent and he wrote a kick ass essay that explored the realms of subconscious creativity that surfaces when one is under extreme duress, such as nearly dying from an inflammatory disorder of the intestine.

He never studied Eastern Religion and he did not really take on the formal teachings of Buddhism. He got a degree in Literary Studies and a secondary school teaching certificate, then got a job teaching high school in Sheepshead Bay.

When he wasn't teaching he became a Buddhist auto-didact. He accepted that lineal transmission could happen through digital means, so he listened to podcasts and online digital audio and video talks and lectures and interviews and meditated by himself or while walking or while drinking a murky cup of coffee at the Sheepshead Bay High School at 3000 Avenue X in Brooklyn where he taught English, Composition, American Literature and a small, special, invitation-only writing seminar for the most gifted students. In this seminar he invited his young students to embrace the ocean of existence and write whatever inspired them in however or whatever style they wished.

Many wrote about the pain of their existence—for them life was a daily tidal wave of violence and anger and misunderstanding. Children of immigrants from Russia, their lives were torn asunder by bi-lingual challenges, parents who could not understand the language of the country they lived in, who worked menial jobs or opened small businesses like convenience stores and laundries and cash stations. Life was survival and jobs were precarious.

These children, children of the millennium, turned to rap and hip-hop as a means of expression. Whiting felt hopelessly out of his league endeavoring to teach them the English and American canon—Milton, Keats, Shelley—totally

beyond their ability to accept—Kerouac and the beats a little better—but he soldiered on anyway—hitting home runs occasionally and striking out most of the time. He had a curriculum to deliver and at the end of the term it was his job to show he had made the effort and the students had somehow been given the indigestible food he was charged with feeding them.

He loved the town, he loved the Russian and English signs over all the shops, he loved the Bay and the Peninsula and spent many hours walking along the shore, allowing thoughts to rise and fall inside his head much like the waves of the bay.

But that was later.

“Sheepshead! Sheepshead!” exclaimed IV in a rare moment of commentary after Whiting announced at dinner, with only Vivian and IV present, that he was moving to Brooklyn.

“Brooklyn? You’ll hate it!” IV concluded, and shoveled a large dose of pot roast into his mouth.

“Sheepshead Bay is fine,” Vivian concluded, sitting in her bathrobe even though it was 5 o’clock and she was always dressed for dinner in the past. She was getting sick at this point, although no one knew it then, including her.

And so Whiting packed up and left. He had things in the Manhattan place and things at Narragansett, but he only took what he absolutely needed, and Vivian pressed him to take a few pieces of furniture for his studio near the High

School. He had to hire a van for transporting the stuff, and somehow drove the U-Haul out to Brooklyn himself.

It wasn't that hard.

Vivian always worried about him, but when she expressed her concern for Whiting's sensitive nature IV scoffed.

"He'll be all right," IV said, meaning the discussion was over.

Vivian had such a lot of loneliness in her marriage to IV, despite the money.

Whiting, tried to excite his students with early 20<sup>th</sup> Century American writers—especially focusing on Gertrude Stein and Hemingway and Fitzgerald and then the Beats, Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Ginsberg. He talked about boredom, disillusionment, ennui—something he felt they all could intrinsically understand since their lives were laced all through with it, but they lacked the sufficient distance from themselves to see it. Kafka escaped them completely—irony and absurdity, as absurd as their lives were, could not reach that inner core of anger that many of them carried around.

He looked to be one of them. Whiting was a boy really, in a man's body. Many of the young female students felt sorry for him and attracted to him at the same time. The tougher girls tried to save him. The more delicate ones shyly flirted. In the end, Whiting had to leave because of a scandal.

But that was later.

He romanticized the entire period of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century American writers to his students, especially the writing seminar, but they wanted something with rhythm and bite and beat. Whiting tried to show how Fitzgerald had bite and beat but they weren't hearing it.

A few of them latched onto Gertrude Stein:

*The strictest of the one price stores found that they could give things for a little less, when the good Anna had fully said that "Miss Mathilda" could not pay so much and that she could buy it cheaper "by Lindheims."* they read in *Three Lives*. Something about the sing-song rhythmic quality of Stein's prose captured them; mostly the girls. The guys went for Kerouac but then got bored of it and started complaining.

Teaching exhausted Whiting but he kept on until the scandal. It was not his fault. The girl totally lied. He had to leave anyway.

But that was much later.

Many, many years afterward, in 2012 when Whiting was in his early 40's, IV died (He was a hundred and two). Between Whiting and Nappy and Maureen, they all took turns caring for IV, and even Gloria pitched in until she started forgetting things and was diagnosed Dementia. Nappy gave her and Jake a generous retirement fund and they went to live in a nursing home back in upstate New York somewhere where they were originally from. Harry had long since died. Sadly, Vivian died much earlier. (She hadn't even made it to seventy).

After IV finally croaked, the children all decided that it was time to clean up the mess, get rid of the house and move on. Whiting found himself looking through some old boxes and briefcases. He found stuffed dolls from Maureen's past and school reports for all of them. He pulled out a yellow report card from his third grade teacher, Mrs. Glick:

*Alexander gets along with his peers. In fact, he is rather popular. He seems somewhat of a dreamer but has great intensive powers of concentration at odd moments and is somehow able to pull together the necessary elements to do quite well in every one of his endeavors. If he can resist the urge to please people all the time, Alexander V ought to go far.*

Some boxes had Nappy's childhood writing (when he was still a poet) but as we know Nappy grew older, put aside poetry, got a Rhodes Scholarship, studied law, receiving his law degree from the University of Michigan. He was the lawyer who, when everything went to hell in 2008, became a mediator in a private foreclosure program. He helped those beleaguered folks who had been tricked into "modification" programs and left to hang out to dry by banks who changed the terms of agreement, or substituted different terms without telling the borrowers, or proceeded with foreclosure even if the borrower lived up to the agreement-- the usual robber baron stuff that reinvented itself in this new century of outlaw economics. Decidedly Kafkaesque, Whiting thought, but Nappy did not see the irony at all.

“Banker lawyers are good people,” he told Whiting one afternoon as both of them sat in the old house, now virtually empty except for the three rooms Maureen occupied with her cats and her ever changing array of female companions. The other rooms were shuttered; furniture sold at auction, what was left covered in sheets, the old Master bedroom and bath filled with all these cases and boxes that Whiting was currently rummaging through.

“Bank lawyers are good people?” Whiting repeated. “Didn’t you used to be a poet?”

“You outgrow poetry,” Nappy snapped, throwing one of Maureen’s old dolls at the wall. “Sorry.”

“Who are you sorry to—me or the doll?”

“The doll,” Nappy said, without a trace of mockery. *He used to have a sense of humor*, Whiting thought with sadness.

“Bankers are decent, well-meaning sorts but so far their recent behavior with my clients have evaded scrutiny.”

“You’re a commercial lawyer, right?”

“Subspecialty public interest. Privateer, really.”

“What’s that?”

“I attack enemy ships.”

“So—I mean—who is the enemy—the bankers or the borrowers?”

“I can’t really talk to you about this, now, Whiting—after all, you’re nothing but a Buddhist.”

*Nothing but a Buddhist.* Whiting liked the sound of it, if it had not come from Nappy's mouth.

So after IV finally bit the dust, Nappy perused the beachfront part of the house, picking up trash and finding various hidden treasures, while Whiting went through four rooms filled with boxes and drawers of papers and briefcases. IV had made the will in an organized fashion, thank god, but everything else had gone to hell. He'd left the business to Nappy who sold it for a terrifyingly large sum of money—in the hundreds of millions—and Maureen and Whiting realized that they were all disgustingly rich.

Whiting pulled the letter out from the bottom of one of the brief cases. It was from Vivian to Tom who had been dead for thirty years already. Poor Tom—he was fifty-six when he died, the same age Vivian was when she fell down the stairs, broke her tail bone and while in the hospital discovered she had Acute Blastic Leukemia. She went quietly. Her life had been useless and noisy but no one could have predicted how nicely she would allow herself to die.

Whiting loved Tom and mourned his loss. He so missed his melancholy grasp on life—it made him feel less bad about his own meager existence.

5/23/90 2:30 PM

Dear Tom,

I am not your biological mother—she is dead, but I guess I will have to do.

I have long NOT wanted to write you this letter, even though I felt I should. I have been thinking about this for YEARS now and dreading the time when I would need to step up and share with you honestly. I dread it because the last thing I want do is to risk breaking that very slender thread of communication that we have left. I am holding onto keeping

things open and clear between us by the fingernails and my biggest fear is that you will stonewall me completely and cut off all communication.

I don't want that, Tom, not because of my own personal need to have you in my life, although you are very important to me and I DO want you in my life, but because of my love for you and my concern for your well-being. I've decided that I need to share with you my concerns in spite of there not being an open window. I will have to risk that this may make you angry or that you will cut me off completely. We hardly interact, as it is, Tom and you ARE a grown man, but I need to take that chance.

I am writing you because I want to intervene in some way in your life dear Tom—your father certainly won't do it, and I am taking this on totally out of love and concern for you. I am well past being concerned about your drinking, I think your drinking has reached and passed a crisis point. You are an alcoholic to my observation Tom and unless you do something to help yourself at this stage I fear things will escalate to a point of no return. I don't want this to happen because I so love you! I poured my love, energy time and life into you Tom—well not all my energy and life because I had three other children, but in *thought* and *meditation* and *pschic* whatever I poured a great of energy!

You are a brilliant, beautiful young man (well, you are now fifty, so perhaps not SO young), with many options open to you if you can somehow address your addictions and get sober! You know I want you to quit smoking as well. The combination of your years and years of drinking and smoking are creating a perfect storm where you may not be able to recuperate your losses Tom! I mean physically you are basically committing slow suicide and I know you are worth too much to throw your life away like this! No matter how much pain and disappointment you suffer, there is a way out and it is not through addiction.

I do not blame you for your alcoholism Tom. You have a genetic propensity on both sides and you are a sensitive individual. A lot of people drink in their 20's and not all of them become alcoholics. In your case I believe your drinking is hard core, it is not just binge drinking, your personality does a radical change when you drink and you are in danger of alienating people whose support you need. You will never alienate me, Tom.

Speaking frankly, I've found that the 12-step thing is a total bore. There is way too much moral stigma around alcoholism, which is a hangover from the 30's and prohibition. It's bullshit. This is not a moral problem or even a personality problem—it's a brain chemistry problem coupled with certain levels of depression, anxiety and emotional vulnerability. In this society we are all addicts of one kind or another—this is a culture that fosters and encourages addiction, not the least of which is the insidious and now crisis-producing addiction to consumption. We are trained from an early age to become addictive consumers to grease the wheels of a voracious ever-hungry capitalist machine, which is in the process of eating us alive. Although I am going to be honest here—I am an addictive consumer—but when you are an educated woman with too much inherited wealth and way too much time, what is there to do?

Which is exactly what alcohol is doing to you Tom—it is eating you alive. It is eating your body, your mind, your cognitive capabilities, your decision-making abilities, your judgment, your health and vitality, your friends and relationships, and worst of all, your hope. In addition, Tom, it will shorten your life considerably and this scares me and

depresses me. Not only that, Tom, but if you continue to drink at the level you are drinking these minor injuries and skirmishes and losses and black outs will escalate into advanced stages of alcoholism which is probably the most untenable and ugly ways to die.

I am not a professional. No one who knows you will corroborate my feelings. The boys and Maureen (well Maureen is crazy isn't she so let's leave her out of this) tell me you are OK. I do not believe them –not that they are lying but they are your sibs—even if step-siblings, they love you like really brothers and sister, and they may not see or understand what I see or they may be, like you, into denial and not wanting to face this kind of crisis in their beloved brother. I have tried to dismiss this year after year, hoping you would realize the nature of my “hints” and do something about it, but you can't. You are caught up in the throws of a demon Tom and you need help. If you are absolutely confident that drinking is NOT an issue or a problem for you then ignore this letter, but I do not believe that this is true. I think your drinking is interfering with your life. No one knows what you could and can become while you are drunk most of the time Tom, least of all yourself. You have a brilliant mind, God gave you an amazing agility and coordinated body and you are throwing this away! If there was anything I ever did as the inadequate step-parent that I was, please forgive me and let me help you now. I know more now than I knew then. I really want to get on this Tom before your alcoholism escalates to the point where you will be forced into medical intervention—at which point in time damage may be irreversible. Although I was totally clueless about this through your twenties, I have been observing more closely in your 30's, 40's and now 50's Tom and I see a serious problem here that if you value your life, you will address.

As it is I want to lay for you my suggestions:

1. Consult with Great Uncle Harry at Presbyterian and ask him for a referral to a psychiatrist who specializes in addiction. You need someone who can prescribe. To my unprofessional observation you suffer from depression and anxiety and although originally alcohol helped with this, we all know alcohol is a depressant and this has further escalated your pathology. You need someone who is a professional in the field with whom you can share and talk in complete confidence and safety and work on the issues.
2. As soon as possible find a way to get a complete physical and find out where you are at: a liver scan, a brain scan, total blood and urine work up. You need a cardio-assessment as well. Ask \_\_\_\_\_ about this. He may be able to find you someone in her hospital and you can work out payment arrangement. You need a baseline Tom. If a professional diagnoses you, you can apply for disability to pay for this. This WILL DISRUPT YOUR LIFE Tom for the short term, but if you don't make a commitment to your health and well being there will BE NO LONG TERM!
3. You will need hospital medically supervised detox AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. I wouldn't wait even 6 months on this and a year is out of the question.
4. After detox you need to find a rehab that can take a low-income patient. It needs to be residential. You cannot do rehab and keep going by all the places that trigger your addiction.

This letter is radical. I just don't know what else to do. I've been thinking of going to al-anon but so far have been able to bring myself to do it. I did call them a few times. They haven't been much help but I have heard from other people that it is important to let your loved one know how you feel. I really love you Tom AND I'VE GOT YOUR BACK! I will be there with you throughout this entire journey—I am with you now even though you aren't aware of it! But if necessary I will find a way to get you to the most expensive and wonderful rehab on the planet! I'll even deposit you there with your computer, your iPhone—whatever you need, if you you choose to go through this process. Whatever it takes Tom. I want you to get well. One thing I am absolutely sure of—you are a wonderful human being with intelligence and insight and are COMPLETELY worth all the investment me, you or anyone else can make to ensure that your fullest potential can be realized! You have so much going for you Tom and so much to offer to make this world a better place. I just want to make sure your have a running start!

I am enclosing a Memorial Day pair of socks I wish I had made for you, but I bought them at Banana Republic.

Be well.

Be happy.

Be honest.

In love and concern,

Vivian

Whiting wondered if Tom had ever even read this letter, or if he did, what did he think? Something like an enormous rush of sadness came over him upon reading the letter—a part of him wanted to destroy it so no one would see it, although only he and Maureen were there, and Nappy wouldn't give a shit most likely, and another part of him burst into quiet tears. What was the point?

He folded the letter and put it back in the box. Then he took it out and put the letter in the back pocket of his dark green pants. Something told him to hang onto it and not show it to anyone, especially not Maureen.

Whiting went up to the gigantic master bedroom on the second floor and stood before the enormous double King-sized bed, especially ordered from London, that once held Vivian and IV when they had some kind of nuptial

relationship, had held Vivian when she died, quietly, sweetly, asleep with an I.V. and a book of poetry (Lucille Clifton, if he remembered right).

And then, just two weeks previously, that giant bed held IV as he screamed and shouted to his long-dead parents and his brother who wasn't there, all the while completely ignoring his own children and the full time nurse who kept him clean and dry as she could.

This insanity went on until a day before dying IV screamed for Reverend Marshfield, who had died twenty years before. Christ's Church sent the new guy Torrence Burks, a florid man with huge buttocks, red cheeks, tiny little brown ferret eyes hid inside the folds of his blooming skin and a booming, literary voice. Maureen had somehow made a large contribution to the church from the family money without consulting anyone, (the entire estate which she managed after Vivian's death), so Christ's Church was very amenable to sending anyone that IV wanted. He wanted the Reverend and thus he came. IV called him Marshfield right up until the final prayer and his attempt at crossing himself with a bony, misshapen, brown-spotted old hand. Whiting hated his father's hands, but because of his Buddhism was unable to admit he hated his father too.

Just hating the hands was all he could manage.

A million dollar contribution even for a wealthy Parish was nothing to sneeze at.

At his father's deathbed, where IV coughed and snorted and farted, and had fits on and off, Whiting envied Nappy's ability to surf on his iPhone and Maureen's intent focus as she sat at the table doing the household books.

Did no one really care about the dying?

*Do I?*

He had to admit his childhood had been rife with misery. IV was way too old when he was born. It was almost a fatherless childhood. Vivian was frivolous and unavailable in spite of her education at Vassar. She lapped up the life of a woman with inherited wealth and frittered around with too many stupid young men IV never heard or saw. There were not many hired hands in the big house, but there was always somebody doing something—mowing the lawn, cleaning the gutters, putting up shutters—someone to take the children to the sand or remove the sand from their toes or throw them into the bathtub after a day at the beach. These '*someones*' were an ever-changing array of mostly young girls—local girls—babysitters, sometimes an older woman, but mostly younger girls trying to earn extra money.

Whiting had his first sexual experience at fifteen with one of them—Bev. Bev was large and her skin was freckled and wonderful and her body rolled and enveloped him like a large, fat turkey—a dripping Butterball Turkey stuffed to the gills with god knows what. Bev went away to stay with an Aunt in Idaho or something and he never saw her again. He had thoughts about looking her up on

Facebook but he didn't know her last name and she was probably married anyway.

It was almost as if Vivian dropped the children out of her womb and left them. He might as well have been motherless too. She let the boys call her Vivian, but Nappy hated to do that, he called her mommy, even when he was grown up and out of law school, and Whiting couldn't stand the idea of calling her anything so he didn't, but of course Maureen absolutely embraced calling her Vivian. When Maureen spoke Vivian's name her lip curled, her voice took on an acid, irony laced with an acerbic, cutting edge and she allowed herself the full measure of her highly developed sarcastic attempt at wit.

Whiting hated the lack of boundaries between Vivian and her children. She was more like a part-time playmate than a mother. The lack of parameters between the children and Vivian upset him. Retreating from the family into his room or taking long walks on the beach or through town; he spent hours at the local book stores—all this helped, but even after twenty years of meditation he had come to the conclusion that life was exactly what all the Buddhist teachers said: unmitigated suffering.

So for the years from Vivian's death until IV's death Whiting kept away from the family, ensconcing himself in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, teaching high school to angry young men and women who felt cheated by life. Avoiding the family was not that hard to do.

But, now, here he was back at the manse because IV was dead. They had all gathered to watch the old man die, and Maureen spearheaded selling the hoary rattrap, even though they all knew housing sales were soft and they would never get close to the \$10,000,000 IV paid for it. The swimming pool hadn't been working in over ten years and the tile was cracked on the bottom and all around the pool. Nothing worked. The fountain was long dead. The place was a monument to ruin—it was their private Xanadu and any minute Whiting expected someone to come out and ask for “Rosebud.”

People died and the house was next to go. No biggie.

And here was Whiting White and Whiting Black and The Observer, all integrated in one space, having now read that missal from the grave that Vivian left in a brief case— *Who knows if she ever even sent it to Tom? Perhaps it was one of those perpetual “letters never sent!”* (Whiting had an entire file folder for those on his iMac).

Maureen was anxious to get rid of this ugly piece of shit property and travel with her current lover, a very tall Scots woman from Glasgow named Carla Druiminn.

*Druiminn* she curled with her tongue up at the roof of her mouth.

Carla was an art dealer or something and they had in mind to spend some time traveling Europe collecting art and artists and finding conclaves of people like themselves.

Everyone was forty-something and Tom was dead.

Tom had been dead a long time but since Whiting discovered the letter, folded in his back pocket, he could feel that the heat of the energy of Tom's body, his peculiar smell and his whole aura had entered the house, the room, the kitchen with all the open elephant-sized cupboards with nothing in them. Tom was here—the ghost of Tom was revisiting the place. There was some unfinished business, Whiting felt, something else that needed to be done. Tom was here to remind him, to push him to demand him? To get busy and figure it out!

Perhaps it was time to leave his teaching job in Brooklyn and do something else. *Figure it out*, the voice of Tom spoke in his head.

*Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Walk beside me and be my friend.*

Inexplicably Whiting heard the voice of Tom speak Camus's words inside of his head.

*Figure it out, Whiting*, Tom said.

*Figure what out!* Whiting shouted back.

Maureen looked up. Had he spoken aloud? Perhaps not.

It was as if Tom had come back for something before they sold the house and got rid of everything. Tom meant for him to find that letter. Tom had something to say.

"Do you talk to dead people?" Whiting asked Maureen in the kitchen later that afternoon. Carla and Maureen were making stuffed cabbage.

“No, Whiting I don’t do that shit anymore! I’m done with all that hocus pocus.”

“Astrology too?”

“Especially astrology.”

She looked at Carla, Carla looked down at Maureen’s 5’2” frame from her 6’1 ½” height approvingly.

“Yes we are done with dabbling in necromancy, are we not?” Carla intoned in her Scots accent.

“Fine. I just wondered is all.” Whiting took a date from the open box on the table and walked out of the kitchen onto the veranda, covered with leaves and debris and dead mice and even a lifeless bird off in one corner.

“This place stinks,” he said to no one in particular.

*Well, all the more reason to sell it!* the voice of Tom shouted in his head.

There began Whiting’s end to the angelic presence that had dwelled so firmly in his heart and the beginning of a new edition in his life: style. He realized that in order to have friends of any kind he had to be a friend of a certain kind and in 21<sup>st</sup> century that meant breaking ground as a sort of visiting dignitary.

Once the house was sold Whiting was sold. He opened an art gallery in Narragansett; he bought a large house on Maple Avenue, but of course not nearly as large as the *Garage*. He painted it a dull lavender which at first shocked the neighbors but once they found out who he was, son of IV, grandson

of III and about to open the gallery, *Whiting Gallery*, (original name) where he displayed many young, old and middle aged artists of various styles and levels of substance, they embraced him. He was the Curator's Curator and artists from Oregon to Budapest to Louisville clamored for his magic wand of expertise. He found he had a natural talent for judging art.

After fixing up the house he went through his books and threw away all the Buddhist books and the spiritual quest manuals. The science of mind held no interest for him any more—he was most interested in procuring the systematic body of knowledge that encompassed the elements of style. He reasoned he could do more for the social structure as a purveyor of wit and glamor, than to concern himself with the common man's problems of class and all that nasty struggle and striving for power and recognition. He was born with power. He had it. He had money. What did he care about cruelty and chaos? That was not his domain.

The town, walking around, talking to fellow business owners and people, became his wife. He had no need of marriage or any kind of relationships because the town was his significant other, and the elements of style became so enmeshed into his character that looking back on his life he wondered where it had all been, and what was all that searching for anyway?

The Buddhism, the wandering, the wondering, the questioning—all that asking had ceased to plague him anymore. The ocean was near and he could immerse himself in the waves—up to his knees, up to his neck—why if he really

wanted to he could swim way out past the buoys and allow himself to relax and drown if he wanted to. Often these days, with global warming, the waves came in larger than usual, there were sharks—he could easily die. Slip into what Freud termed “the oceanic” phase of life, although Freud was referring to babies, not grown men like Whiting.

“..le fait simple et direct de la sensation de l'éternel..” wrote Rolland to Freud,...”the simple and direct fact of the sensation of the eternal..”

Whiting strained to remember what it felt like in the bygone days when he lived in a constant state of irony, where everything was a little strange and funny and warped to him, where he could detach from the family and realize his place in the universe, when he had a sense of humor.

After closing the art gallery one evening he stretched himself, ran down to the beach, took off his clothes, leaving them in a trivial pile on the sand. It was half empty at 7 p.m. but in mid-August still light out. On a Thursday night in summer many of the young girls and boys were enjoying their sexual play and showing off their bodies. Whiting had seemingly skipped that phase of life—gone on in his usual detached way—separate from everything that life had to offer and now he was about to plunge into the waters warmed by a summer hotter than usual, thanks to carbon emissions.

Some part of Whiting had never stopped whining. These days he whined about global issues, and kept the personal issues down below some unseen surface, inaccessibly even to himself.

It was completely unnecessary to throw off the burden of inherited wealth, he pondered to himself, dismissing the presence of both Whiting White and Whiting Black, so why bother? He could become part of the water, he realized, and forget about all those memories he had of Vivian and IV and Nappy and Maureen.

That was all a long time ago, wasn't it?

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