

WUNDERKIND

CHAPTER ONE

Poetry

It is 8:45 on Friday morning October 25 1985 and I just woke up to discover that I am a writer. Is this because today is Picasso's birthday? I don't know, but I'm a strange guy. It's like I can be something for years without realizing it. Maybe we're all like that.

Anyway, I started playing gigs when I was twelve - the usual wedding and bar mitzvah scene, with an occasional Irish beer party thrown in. Later it was fraternity parties, even tours up and down the East Coast, clubs in New York, hotels in Bermuda. I must have played almost every Friday or Saturday night until I was twenty but it never even occurred to me until about twenty years later that I was a musician.

I think this has something to do with what Sartre talks about when he says that in Europe a waiter is a waiter, down to his fingertips, down to the last bone in his body. In America its not like that at all - a waiter is only a person who is playing at being a waiter. That's the main difference between Europe and America, it seems to me.

So when I tell you I discovered a few minutes ago that I am a writer you won't be surprised to find out that with that realization came the equally upsetting thought that I have been a writer all of my life without knowing it.

I can imagine if someone else had the idea that he was a writer come into his head, if he took it seriously and didn't just dismiss it, that he would start to look around for something to write, maybe a story or something like that. For me, this morning, it's not really a problem at all, because along with the realization that I am a writer, and that I have always been a writer, comes the added bonus of knowing what it is that I must write. My autobiography. The story of my life.

I know that writing it won't be easy. It's not just that I will have to write about so many awful, embarrassing things that have happened to me - but what if no one will believe all this stuff, what then?

When you really get down to it the only thing that I have ever really asked in my life is to be left alone to do my own work. That I have never been given the chance to do this is probably something that I should blame myself for. Why do I go on blaming my children, my wives, my friends for keeping me from my work, for endlessly distracting

me and forcing me to fight for every spare second that I need, when it was I who surrounded myself with them in the first place? I did that to myself out of some weird perversity; that I succeeded in spite of myself is a part of the story.

I was born on May 22, 1939, in South Philadelphia of Jewish parents, one from Russia and one from Poland. My mother didn't come to America until she was nine years old. She left Russia to live in Warsaw for a year after escaping from the pogroms with her mother, brother and sister. The recollections of those horrors were so great for her that even when I was in my teens I can remember her waking up from nightmares, moaning and wailing with a voice that sounded like it came from the other side of the grave. Whenever I asked her what she had been dreaming about it was always the same - cut-off heads, arms and legs rolling in the gutter from Jews being slaughtered by the Czar's Cossacks on their latest raid on Drogichin, the little town between Kiev and Odessa where they lived.

My maternal grandfather, Morris Feldman, came to America alone shortly after my mother was born. His idea was to find work and a place to live, save some money, get established and then send for the rest of the family. Although he had been a teacher in Russia (a very learned man, according to my mother) he could only find employment as a shipping clerk in Philadelphia, a job he stayed at for the rest of his life. Her earliest memory of her father, after the family was finally reunited in America nine years after her birth, was a sharp smack to the face when she first greeted him in Russian. Russian was a language that was forbidden in their house. Only English conversation was allowed. You see, the drive to become American was so strong in these immigrants that they attempted to blot out every trace of the Old World as quickly and therefore as brutally as possible.

My father was born in South Philadelphia also, but his parents came from an area of Poland that was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These Polish Jews in America and England were looked down upon by the more sophisticated and wealthy Jews from Germany and Russia and were spoken of as loud, common and vulgar. This Polish grandfather, Isaac, was a cap maker, short with a red face and bushy moustache in contrast with my Russian grandfather who was tall and aristocratic. I called both grandfathers 'zayda'. My Polish grandfather, who was busy chasing ladies in the neighborhood well into his seventies, was known to my aunts and uncles as 'Pop'.

My own parents were real Americans in their teens, which is to say that they sought at first to destroy every vestige of ethnic identity in themselves. Although their parents were Orthodox Jews, they wanted no

part of their dark racial past, which held little or no interest to the white Americans around them, at best being an embarrassment and at worst a deep shame. They failed in this endeavor. They fought it, neglected it, yet were bound to it; the centuries of tradition, unhappiness, persecution were too deeply ingrained in them to be ignored or simply dropped.

The story that I was always told about their meeting and marriage is that my mother called my father 'her kid brother' (she refused to take him seriously for quite a while) but that he persisted until she finally gave in. Maybe because he was shorter than the other boys she thought he was quite a bit younger than she was. Actually they were both quite surprised to find out that they shared the same birthday, January 1. They were even more surprised when they found out that they were also the same age.

Both of them had been born at midnight on New Year's eve 1913. When they figured out the time difference between Russia and the United States they found out that they both had come into the world at the same minute, maybe even the same second.

This fact is an extremely important one to me, since it represents the beginning of my preoccupation with birthdays. As a matter of fact, because I was an only child, I often found myself alone on New Year's eve watching the raucous celebration on TV from Times Square in New York, or in the earliest years listening to it on the radio. The first time I can remember being left alone when they went off to celebrate their birthday I got the idea that New Year's eve was the birthday of everyone in the world and that in fact all of humanity was celebrating its common day of birth. Part of my feeling so different from everyone else, I am sure, derives from my believing that only I of everyone in the world was born on a different day.

When we look at the early photos of me we see a two- year-old with curly white hair wearing a cute but somewhat idiotic grin. If we look more closely we see that I am holding a little pet lamb. Now, I am of the opinion that a child's favorite stuffed toy often will have a great influence on the formation of his character. In this case it symbolizes a lamb being led to the slaughter. With that mindless smile on my face I give myself to the world butcher for whatever purpose is desired. No, perhaps give is a poor choice of words; rather I sell myself. There is already a bit of the entertainer here, the con artist, whose great ability is to get people to like him through my charm and helplessness. As Lenny Bruce used to say, whereas the American Blacks tried to divert their white masters with their ability to entertain, the Egyptian, a more difficult master to please, could not be diverted by a song and dance, but only by charm: "Come watch the Jew be charming."

In the photo I am standing in my playpen, my little cage, on Snyder Avenue in South Philadelphia, clutching my toy lamb and being just as cute and charming as I can. I appear to be trying to talk to the passers-by, who at that time in 1941 were undoubtedly more interested in the war with the Germans and trouble brewing with the Japanese than they were with me.

Everything is of significance in such a photo, in such a frozen moment in time. My eyes are of a light color, blue later to change to green. Further on in life I find that the two women with whom I mate also have the same eye color with light hair, so I later see these reflected in all seven of my own children. My ears stick out, inviting an unmerciful amount of teasing about this fact from my father. Later these ears are hidden under hats, behind masses of hair - even carefully pressed against my pillow before going to sleep in the hopes that they will be trained to lie closer to my head. My cheeks are round and rosy, inviting a pinch or other aggressive attack. In short my entire appearance is one which I am to find repeatedly disquieting, even revolting.

In the photo, then, I am speaking. If anyone had bothered to listen to me they might have been surprised at what I said, for the gift of speech had been given to me at an early age and with it the unusual ability to remember anything that was said to me. It came as a pleasant surprise to my mother, who loved to read me bedtime stories and poetry, that after one hearing I was able to recite the entire thing back to her, word for word. I was in fact an early model of the modern tape recorder, as Mozart had been. I was said, falsely, to have a photographic memory, since my memory was specific to sound - not to sight. This ability was very quickly promoted.

I first found employment at age two when I was drafted out to the local CBS affiliate, WCAU. Every Sunday morning on The Children's Hour radio show, I was enlisted to recite poetry live, listened to by a home audience of hundreds of thousands. We can picture the late two- and early three-year- old wunderkind standing on a black podium reciting Shelley's To a Skylark into a microphone. His hands are at his sides. His short pants reveal straight little legs ending in rolled- down socks and brown shoes. The look on his face is of the little soldier reporting for duty - he is simply facing the roll call, answering, doing his job. So, at the age of two, a new star came into the world.

And yet since what I did was very unique, even bizarre, I could never blend in with the other older children on that show who sang, did skits, or tap danced. Even here on stage I was a freak, a freak of nature for which there was no explanation. Week after week the poetry rolled off my tongue. Not just Shelley, but Byron, Keats, Shakespeare, Milton,

Longfellow, Blake - the whole lot. Recordings were even made, which he I heard years later. The words are not always clear, but recognizable. The voice stops only for a quick breath or a swallow, on and on, mindlessly spinning Hiawatha's Childhood or The Passionate Shepherd to His Love. At the age of four I could do the complete Kubla Khan and at five "To be or not to be" from Hamlet. It is hard for me now to believe the soliloquies, the odes, sonnets and lyrics that I regurgitated then, always in the same singsong cadence, over the Philadelphia airwaves.

One night in a fit of rebellious rage I stuffed paper into my ears to keep out the sound of my mother's insistent voice. I had finally refused to listen to her any more. We both found to our horror that the paper wouldn't come out. I screamed in pain as she tried to pry it out with little sharp tools taken from her cosmetic box. Finally I was taken to the doctor, where an ether mask was placed over my face. As I struggled to tear it off, gagging on the overpowering smell, I had my first real taste of death. From that point on my performances, even into adult life, carried for me the taste of rebellion, anger, helplessness, and murder.

The Sunday recitations went flawlessly. My memory was perfect, my voice unfaltering, my delivery steady and sure. But one Sunday I unexpectedly forgot my lines and in front of a live audience experienced a second trauma, that of failure. I hesitated for a moment. The audience held its breath. Miraculously, I picked out my mother's face in the crowd, saw her lips forming the next word. This clue was enough for me. I was able to continue to the end.

But what I had experienced (coming to the edge of the abyss, facing the possibility of complete failure and breakdown), the fear of forgetting, joined anger as the second burden which I would bear as a performer into my adult life. And of course it inevitably spread beyond the confines of the stage, of the radio airways, into every aspect of that life. After all, for me, life itself was a performance. So the fear of death and failure accompanied my every action from that time forth.

We might say that I was a professional at age two, except for the fact that I was not paid for my work. What was in it for me? The big payoff for all us kids on the Children's Hour came at the end of the year, around Christmas, when the Horn and Hardart Baking Company (the automat restaurant owners who sponsored the show) gave each of us a fruitcake. We watched with excitement as our parents dutifully accepted the large, heavy, pink cardboard boxes containing the sticky treasures which would be devoured in a few hours by the whole family at home.

This was not true for me. I hated fruitcake. Even the thought of it made me sick. Raisins, fruit, nuts, cake are all fine by themselves, but

somehow all mixed up together and glazed they still make my insides turn over. And so the cosmic joke was that year after year, for seven years, like Jacob toiling for Rachel, my reward turned out to be not at all what I had hoped for. Unlike the Calvinists, who could preserve the illusion that their hard work would be rewarded, I was convinced every Christmas that the fruitcake of my labor would be fully, inevitably, nauseating.

And what happened to the pink cardboard box with the fruitcake inside? After smilingly accepting it from Mrs. Landsberg who ran the show (a further irony - a gift from Jew to Jew at Christmas time) my parents and I took it home and put it on the dining room table. My parents knew of my aversion to the stuff, so it got quickly dumped in the garbage can. Although they were my accomplices in this criminal act, they later became its victims as the garbage can got used as a final resting place for my mother's own food that I could not swallow. I had learned to deceive my parents through a yearly ritual in which they were my accomplices; they taught me the means to betray them. If you don't like something - throw it in the garbage can. But don't let anyone see you do it.

For years afterward, every time my plate was loaded with food that I didn't like I could either spit it out into my napkin and drop it in the can when my mother turned away, or if I was really quick dump a whole lot in directly from the plate itself. The depth of this betrayal can only be fully understood when you realize how closely love and food are related in the Jewish family. If you love me, you eat my food. Therefore, for the Jewish child there is only one commandment, not ten, and that commandment is - EAT!

On one occasion my mother's older sister, Aunt Clara, invited me to dinner. So great was my love for her (and consequently my desire to please) that I didn't have the heart to refuse her food. As a matter of fact, I pretended to eat her boiled chicken with great gusto only slowing down when I hit the cooked carrots, which had always been hard for me to get down. Actually Aunt Clara wasn't fooled at all. She even gently teased me about it when I was grown up. Somehow she was able to tell that my enthusiasm was just put on.

City life agreed with me. With two adoring parents and no competition from siblings my existence proved pleasurable, for the most part. My reputation was growing every week with each new radio appearance. The year was 1944. Over the summer I went to a private camp in the mountains where my parents worked. It was extremely hot on the Eastern seaboard when, without warning, the biggest epidemic of poliomyelitis in history began knocking off kids like flies.

At first they thought I had the flu when they put me in the infirmary. It was only when I fell into my father's arms while walking down the steps to greet him that they realized I was paralyzed. The ride of seventy miles in a screaming ambulance from Stroudsburg to Philadelphia was just the beginning of the nightmare that was to dominate my early life.

CHAPTER TWO

My Leg

My leg hurts today. Of course it is my left leg. It is always the left, the one on the left side, because that is the one that was shattered in a head-on car collision in Vermont and twenty-eight years before that was paralyzed by the polio virus.

The rule for going up for a layup in basketball is to go off the inside foot, so I could only approach the basket properly from the left side going off the right foot. But I was fortunate in being a piano player, since the important pedal is worked with the right foot; the other one is not used so much. On the other hand, the soft pedal (worked with the left foot) does have to be held down for longer periods of time without letup and that, sometimes, can cause discomfort.

My friends immediately notice when I am tired because I limp. Yet people have known me for years without noticing my limp. They don't even know that one of my legs looks like a stick compared to the other, which is very muscular. Hiding a physical deformity is a great art and can become the preoccupation of a lifetime. In a sense all of us are deformed in one way or another and spend a good deal of our time trying to hide it.

When I think back to that blisteringly hot summer in 1944, when the war was raging with Germany in Europe and with the Japanese in the Pacific, the conditions in the hospitals in which I found myself were not unlike improvised medical centers far from home. In many parts of America you wouldn't particularly know that a world war was on, certainly compared to the horrors of the Russian Gulags, the European theaters of action, or the Indo-China Jungles. Many American small towns were relatively untouched by the Depression or World War II. But in hospitals like the one in which I found myself, where children were dying every day from a disease that no one understood, we were involved in an extremely desperate and chaotic situation.

Many American hospitals were terribly overcrowded. No one knew how to treat poliomyelitis. All that was known was that a previously healthy child showed signs of a cold, a flu, with malaise and fever, and then suddenly became paralyzed. Sometimes (with the lucky ones) it was a hand, an arm, a leg; the not so fortunate kids caught it in the neck or the

breathing muscles themselves. No one knew what caused it, no one knew how long it would last. Since it was assumed to be an infectious disease, each child was for a month isolated from the world. No one knew then that it was caused by a virus spread through the feces. Because they guessed that it was spread through respiration or coughing, each child in the hospitals was isolated by a white curtain around the bed and only occasionally got to see human faces, peering in with masks on.

I am not sure to this day if the psychological damage to these children (the ones who survived) was not greater than the lasting physical effects. For me to be separated from my parents whom I had seen every day for five years - a social creature who loved people and needed them - to be put into solitary confinement where the sounds of screaming, dying and terrified small children was the chief environmental stimulus, was horrible beyond belief.

Probably the hardest thing to deal with was not being able to move, to walk, to run, to get up. Polio didn't cause a serious change in sensation; you still felt pain but you just couldn't move some part of your body - in my case my leg. It did feel a little bit like it was asleep, though, like there were pins and needles in it.

The food was not terribly appetizing. But at least we did get to eat ice cream. They let us drink lemonade, too, although we were encouraged to drink milk. It was almost always served with a glass straw in it bent into a funny angle. Sucking warm milk out of a glass straw with the temperature at ninety degree in the shade and the humidity pushing 90% was no fun, I can tell you that. I wanted to bite and break those glass straws and thermometers they kept putting in my mouth but I was afraid that something bad would happen if I did.

After a month in the isolation ward of Philadelphia General Hospital a child was considered noninfectious. He or she was then moved to the Children's Hospital where every square foot of space was being used. Children slept outside, inside, in the halls. Beds were everywhere.

The dominant features of these wards were the iron lungs. These were respirators which kept the children who had brain-stem involvement alive. The whole body lay permanently in these things with just the head sticking out. Over the top was a mirror in which you could see the child's face and through which he or she could see yours. These children could talk and cry but also sometimes they would disappear and not return.

Those of us who could move were in beds or cribs with high sides. At night when we were supposed to be asleep we used to drag ourselves up and try to walk. One night I fell out onto a cold hard linoleum floor. It took quite a while for the nurse to get to me. I must've woken up the whole ward with my yelling.

One of the best things that happened in the two months I spent in the Children's Hospital was that my mother came to work there as a nurse's aid. I'm not sure how she managed to do it - she did spend most of her time working with the other nurses and children - but just seeing her there and getting some attention from her made me feel a whole lot better. She often brought me books as well as toys and gifts from my aunts and cousins, and it was here that I taught myself to read.

There were several kinds of treatment tried on us but nothing seemed to work very well. Part of the physiotherapy involved putting hot packs on our useless arms and legs. These packs were applied boiling hot with several layers of a waxy yellowish material between your body and the hot flannel which smelled with a strong musky odor. It was a regular treatment done a few times every day. You knew when it was coming because a big tray would get wheeled down the ward by several nurses. You could also smell it coming. The wax gave off its own smell, too, when the hot packs were put on.

Another thing that they tried was gamma-globulin injections. These were really awful because first of all they stuck you with a needle (which every kid hates) and second because the stuff inside its big fat glass thing was so thick. It hurt a lot when it went in, not just the needle but the stuff they squeezed into you, too. Finally, it was over. Seeing the other kids was a treat when, after a while, we got wheeled around outside on the roof. Many of us had to use crutches and learn to walk all over again. Some kids couldn't walk at all; others had to use braces. This was the big topic of conversation, whether a kid was going to have to wear braces or not. They were ugly metal and leather things strapped to your leg that helped you to walk. Some of the kids had to wear them for life.

After walking with crutches for a while the nurses encouraged me to try to walk without them. This was hard because you were afraid that if you took a step you would fall. So you stood out there in the middle of the floor, trying to get up enough courage to move. Getting going, taking that first step, was the worst part. Of course once you got going it was pretty hard to stop, too. But after a while you got to be pretty good at it. The hardest thing of all was trying to run.

Walking began to feel natural. It was very safe. But running was really tough; it involved a lot of effort. I still wasn't able to run when I left. I was very glad to leave. I never wanted to see the inside of a hospital again. Yet later in life I kept coming back to hospitals either for treatments or to visit friends. Finally when I went to medical school I found myself living in a hospital once more. When you got out of the hospital, if your leg could walk pretty well, you only had to use Canadian crutches. They weren't the long kind that fitted under your armpits but just came to above the elbow. You remembered how your leg felt in the

hospital. When you walked it was like dragging a big heavy thing along after you. But now the leg didn't feel so heavy, so it wasn't so hard to walk. It was slow going though. You couldn't walk very far without getting tired. Then you just wanted to give up.

I remember having my picture taken a lot. Finally I saw myself on a big poster with two little girls advertising the March of Dimes, which tried to raise money to fight polio. No matter what I did I couldn't escape being in the public eye. Somehow they had turned this whole ordeal I had gone through into a new publicity stunt and I was more famous than before. When I came back on the Children's Hour I got the welcome of a wounded soldier coming back from the war. I was a hero. But certainly not due, in my mind, to any marvellous accomplishment (like killing a dragon) but rather because I had the misfortune to have something horrible happen to me.

The big push was on now in the fall of 1944 to get me back on my feet, to do all the normal things that other kids did. I'm sure the same driving force that compelled my mother to adjust to America when she was a greenhorn kid from Russia surfaced again to make me fit in. I was under orders to go out and play, no excuses accepted. I was forced to keep up with the others and to outperform them in some miraculous way.

Around this time I had a physical confrontation with a kid who was later to become a close friend. He was the bully of the block who regularly beat up the other kids. He ruled them in a reign of terror. I was somehow pushed forward to challenge his authority and managed to get in a lucky punch to the nose. In those days the appearance of blood was enough to end the fight. I was carried home on the shoulders of my friends.

Because the war was in full swing we all had lots of toy guns and war equipment. My five favorite guns were my two pearl handled revolvers, my rifle, my machine gun and my little pistol. I got so furious at a kid one day that I took his favorite gun and threw it down the sewer. When the kid's mother came to our house to complain, I was made to stand in front of my gun collection and let the kid pick whichever of them he wanted. I held my breath, hoping against hope that he would take the plain wooden rifle which I didn't like half as much as the flashier weapons. Somehow, miraculously he did choose it, convincing me on the spot that some people were born stupid and others smart. Actually, today, I would probably applaud the kid's good taste and my own stupidity.

But the one toy I owned that must have been the envy of every kid on the block was a tank. It was really one of those little metal cars that you pedal with your feet going back and forth, but the outside was painted a khaki color with a big white star on it. The best part was a

machine gun mounted on the front which shot off real sparks. In those days the good guys were the Americans and the bad guys the Germans or Japs. Since somebody had to play the part of the Jap, it usually fell to the lot of the weakest or smallest kid, who became a real psychological basket case for life. Of course since I had the tank I never had to be the Jap.

My Uncle Bob at that time was off in Okinawa, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima and all points east and used to send me letters and pictures of himself in uniform. I got my own marine uniform, looking very smart in blue jacket with brass buttons, peaked hat and white gloves. Best of all were the grey pants with a satin stripe down the side. Most of my fantasies were of war. In a funny way the neighborhood games mirrored the latest news from the front. The day the war ended there was a frenzy of blaring radios and people dancing in the street, but this also signalled the end of our war games which the returning veterans wanted to forget about as soon as possible. I could never understand as a child why no soldier I met, including Uncle Bob the marine, could ever be induced to talk about his war exploits.

It was around this time that I started school. That first day did a great deal to influence my later scholastic experiences, since when it was discovered that I could already read and write I was put immediately into the second grade. This was considered to be a marvellous achievement in the eyes of my teachers and parents but actually it was a decision that proved to be an incalculable catastrophe for me. Already physically handicapped and socially maladjusted from my weekly appearances before the radio microphone, I was now fated to be the smallest kid in the class right up until my graduation from high school some ten years later. The decision had been made by my parents to leave West Oak Lane where we lived in our own house at 1637 Mayland St., and where I played every day in the street with my friends, to move to West Philadelphia, where I was to live in a grim stone apartment.

The hardest part of this decision, for me, was that I had to walk into a third grade class with kids who had been together since kindergarten as a new kid - small, defenceless, afraid. Fortunately these new children adopted me like a stray lamb and several strong friends immediately stepped forward to protect me. Thus began some of the happiest years of my life, years that gave me the warmth and support that I needed to become a human being and overcome the traumas of my early childhood. My socialization had begun.