Liar from Vermont

The year Elizabeth II was crowned Queen of England and Edmund Hillary conquered Mount Everest, I first said I was from Vermont. To me, the three events had equal significance. No glory the Queen might have felt at Westminster Abbey could possibly have matched my pride in my identity; but the problems Hillary encountered in conquering the unvanquished peak seemed inconsequential next to the difficulties of explaining how a child born and raised near Detroit could be a native Vermonter.

My difficulties began in the suburbs of Boston two months after my seventh birthday, at Mary Anderson Memorial School. It was my first day at a public school, and I was only there for a year—the Great Man was spending two semesters at Harvard and I had to be educated in the interim. He and Mother had warned me that Mary Anderson Memorial wouldn't be at all like John Dewey Elementary, where I had gone at home. And it wasn't. We said prayers before class, just as if that were normal, and the chairs were bolted to the floor in rows, too far away from desks that were too high, so we couldn't see anybody but the teacher. The children were different, too. By nine o'clock, the yellow-shaded room was perfectly quiet while they copied the teacher's name, Miss Coffin, off the blackboard. I had never seen perfectly quiet children before—at John Dewey, we'd been

encouraged to express ourselves. But Miss Coffin seemed not to notice how unnatural the silence was. She tapped up and down the aisles of studious heads, upright and immaculate in high heels, straight gray skirt, and red lipstick. My row was going to be the next-to-last she came to, I saw. Hurriedly, I wrote her name in thick pencil, then looked out the window and thought about Vermont.

"Vermont" to me was not the state, but the sagging farmhouse the Great Man had bought when I was in kindergarten. It didn't have much paint on it when we first saw it, and it had a privy instead of a bathroom. Mother had running water installed right away, and Joan, our neighbor's daughter, was so excited by the toilet that she flushed it four or five times whenever she came over. Her privy had three holes, and you washed your hands at the tap in the kitchen.

Joan's father was a farmer. He didn't talk unless he had to, but he could lift rocks onto the wall he was building for us as easily as he could boost me up on the back of Tommy, one of his roan work horses. I liked to watch him swing the boulders into place, smiling to himself while the sweat made his blue shirt stick to his back. His team helped him—patient Tommy, who looked just like him, and Teddy, who was young and not safe for kids to ride. Most of the time, they stood placidly under the apple tree, whisking their short tails at flies. But when he had loaded the stone-boat from the pile of boulders and started to back them towards it, they began to prance. I could feel the ground shake under their bucket-sized hooves from my perch, fifty feet away.

"Whoa!" They stopped, trembled, waited for him to drop the chain over the iron pin.

Clink.

They leapt forward—too soon, too soon!—"Whoa, whoa, Tommy . . ." He had to dig his heels in as they towed him forward by the reins.

"Baaaack, baaack, eeeeasy now . . ."

Foam floated out of their open mouths, and sometimes Teddy half reared, backing on his hind legs.

"Whoa." They stopped. Trembled. Waited. I dug my fingers into my hands.

Clink.

"Git!" They jumped forward together into their collars, their huge shoulders leaning over their forelegs, pulling, pulling . . . "Whoa!" Back, ever so slightly, then, "Git!" and they strained, their heads down to their knees, hooves tearing the ferns, farther, farther . . . and they were there.

"Whoa!" Teddy threw up his head and nipped at Tommy as Joan's father drove them back to the apple tree. They snorted, rubbed their faces on their legs, then began to munch grass quietly, shaking their blinders. I fed them sugar out of my trembling, flat hand, wondering at their gentleness.

"Peggy, does this look like what you saw on the board?"

Miss Coffin was standing at my right elbow, frowning. I looked at her carefully, which was how, at John Dewey, you figured out if your teacher was smarter than you were. Most of them weren't. They tended to have eyes like cows—soft and kind, but with only one expression. The Great Man said this was because they had a Theory. But there was nothing theoretical about Miss Coffin's gray-blue eyes. I decided not to sass.

"Well, no. Not exactly." The letters didn't go the same direction. They'd remarked on this at John Dewey, but they'd said it was a sign of originality.

"Let me see you write it."

I picked up the pencil in my left hand and started in as neatly as I could, but she stopped me.

"That's backwards. Can you make it go the other way?"

I could, if I really thought about it. But it was hard to concentrate with her watching like that, so some of the letters

went backwards, even though the printing went the right way this time. All the other children, still silent, were watching me. I put my hand behind my back, and Miss Coffin, still frowning, finished checking the other papers in my row. I looked out the window again.

In Vermont, my hideout was across the mowing—a granite ledge, gray, streaked with white marble. At its top, moss grew thick, green, and moldy-smelling, so deep that when I lay on my back, it tickled my nose. Underneath the ledge, on its sunny side, three-leaved plants bore strawberries between the devil's paintbrushes and buttercups. Some days I lay there all morning, rolling my tongue over the tiny red sweetnesses that tasted like dirt and grass, sniffing the lemon smell of crushed fern, listening to the white-throated sparrows sing their four sad notes in the humid sunlight.

"Boys and girls," Miss Coffin was saying, "Peggy Hamilton is our new girl this year. Can you tell us a little about yourself, Peggy?"

What was there to tell? They already knew I couldn't write.

Miss Coffin smiled this time. "Just tell us what you'd like us to know about you," she prompted.

What I'd *like* them to know? Well, that was easy. "I'm from Vermont," I said proudly. "My dad has a hundred acres there, and we farm it. We have ten heifers and fifteen milk cows and a bull. And an old tractor and two work horses, Tommy and Teddy. My dad builds walls, and my mom . . . well, she helps out with the chores and stuff . . ." I stopped, my fingers crossed inside my clenched fists.

Miss Coffin looked puzzled. "Thank you, Peggy." She called a reading group to the front, and I stared at the arithmetic on the board. Slowly, I ground my first finger and thumb together as hard as I could on the top of my leg. It had been wonderful, making those quiet kids look interested. But it was a lie, and liars had to be punished.

Ω

Grammy was making sandwiches when I came home for lunch. “How was your morning, dear?”

“All right, I guess. My teacher's name is Miss Coffin.”

“Poor dear! Imagine going through life with a name like that!” Grammy's name was long and German. It meant “God's chosen.”

“Maybe she'll get married,” I suggested helpfully. “She's pretty.”

“I'm sure she will, then.” Grammy spread mayonnaise over the freshly-baked bread. “Are there any nice children in your class?”

“Can't tell yet.” Nice children were kids who didn't watch television or read comic books, had mothers that didn't work, and weren't either Unitarian or Catholic. They were hard to pick out on the first day of school. “Where's Mother?”

“At the faculty club with your father.”

“Didn't she remember I come home for lunch here?”

Grammy's apron smelled like fresh bread as she gave me a hug. “She knew I'd be here to take care of you,” she said. That was the nice thing about Grammy: taking care of me was all she had to do.

We ate our sandwiches in the dining room. There was a table in the kitchen, but civilized people didn't eat there—except in Vermont, where there was no dining room, only the kitchen, big and bright, where everybody who came to visit ended up sitting around the table. But this wasn't Vermont, so Grammy and I sat across the dining room table from each other, saying grace. That was our secret. The Great Man didn't believe in God, and at John Dewey they said He was optional, but He was a private friend of Grammy's and mine. Sometimes we read the

Bible together, when my parents were out. Grammy knew all the best stories.

"Grammy," I said after we'd finished, "don't you wish we'd moved to Vermont instead of here?" In Vermont, nobody cared which way my printing went.

"Vermont is nice in the summer," she said, "but you'd get tired of eating in the kitchen and using paper napkins if we did it all year around."

I liked paper napkins, but I knew it was useless to argue. "Yes, but wouldn't it be wonderful to have our own cows, so we could milk them and drink it all warm, right out of the pail?"

"Gracious! Can you imagine me milking a cow?" She was sitting with her back to the window, and the light behind her caught the white hairs that had slipped out of her bun, making her a delicate halo. The hands folded on her placemat were so thin I could see all the little bones that became her fingers where her palms stopped being palms. No, I couldn't imagine her milking a cow, much less doing the other chores I knew had to be done when you kept cows in a barn.

"Well, I'd milk the cows, then. You could make bread and watch sunsets."

Grammy laughed. "It would be too cold to watch sunsets in winter, dear." But as she cleared the plates, I knew she was thinking about Vermont evenings, when she sat on the stone slabs that made the front steps of our house, watching the sun lower itself into the purple gray mountains and the faraway mirror of the lake. After it was gone, the clouds blazed pink and orange, and Grammy, facing them, became a pastel reflection of their softness—serene, remote, untouched by the world.

"Peggy?" Grammy's hand patted my shoulder. "The policewoman has come on duty, and here you are, just sitting and dreaming. You'd better hurry."

I hurried, wondering how I was ever going to be able to

explain to the other kids that I lived in Vermont, when they could see I lived right across the street from school.

It turned out not to be a problem; the kids never put two and two together. That made them different from my friends at John Dewey, who would have seen through my fibs in two seconds, beaten me up, and then wanted to learn all about the farm. I was glad not to be beaten up, though I knew peer pressure was an important factor in developing a conscience. On the other hand, since everybody believed me, I had to go on lying, and that got harder and harder. Lying to Miss Coffin, for instance, was so tough—she always paid attention to details, and sometimes I forgot which ones I'd added—I didn't see how I could keep it up for two whole terms. And then there was Mr. Kerry, the principal. Every time it was my turn to take a note to the office, he'd put his head out of his special little room and say, "How's the little girl from Vermont?" So to keep up face, I'd have to tell him how the cows were doing, or later in the fall, how we were splitting wood for the stoves— "It's hard, Mr. Kerry. You have to hit the log in exactly the right place, or your maul just bounces back."

"Yeah? What's a maul, Peggy?"

He sure didn't know much about farming. "It's like a sledgehammer, only one end is like an ax. You use the ax end to split logs, and the hammer side makes it heavier."

"You don't say!" His eyes were large and brown, and he liked to listen to me. Probably he had a Theory. Sometimes he walked me back to my classroom, his white socks flashing between his pants and his shoes. When I got to my seat, I'd pinch myself once for each time I'd fibbed to him. The whole top of my left leg was purple, now, and I'd had to start in on the right one. When the nurse who did the physicals asked me how on earth I'd gotten all those bruises on my thighs, I said I'd run into a hedge on my bike. I gave myself two pinches for that later on—one about the hedge, and the other because I didn't have a bike.

A week after the physicals, Miss Coffin gave me a sealed envelope to take home.

"What's in it?" I asked with John Dewey suspicion.

"A note about a conference that I'd like to have with your mother." Her voice told me John Dewey suspicion didn't sit very well with her, but I didn't take the note, even so.

"Is it about my printing?" Miss Coffin had noticed I threw a ball with my right hand, so she'd suggested I try writing with that hand, too. My right hand didn't know any more about making letters than my left knew about throwing balls, but Miss Coffin said it would learn if I practiced. It didn't. After six weeks, I still picked up the pencil in my left hand unless she stopped me, and no matter how hard I tried, the letters wouldn't stay on the lines.

"That, and a few other things."

"Mother's pretty busy with the faculty women's cl—" oops— "I mean, the Farm Bureau. They really need women to help work for government subsidies, so she doesn't have much time."

Miss Coffin smiled a little smile I didn't like very much and pushed the note into my hand. "I'm sure we can arrange a time when she can see me, Peggy."

I was sure, too. Miss Coffin never had trouble getting what she wanted. I scuffed my shoes as hard as I could on the sidewalk as I dawdled past the statue of Mary Anderson. It was all going to come out now—and what would Grammy say when she found out I was a liar? Would she let God forgive me? Maybe He would forgive me even if she didn't, but what good would that do? And what if He turned out to be optional after all?

When I got home, Grammy and Mother were setting the table with the best china and silver.

"Who's coming?" I asked. "Can I eat with you?"

"*May* I," said Mother, giving me a hug. "It's a special party to celebrate your father's translation of *The Odyssey*."

I liked *The Odyssey*. The Great Man had read bits of it to

me as he translated along. The stories in it were cool—every bit as gory as the ones in the Bible. "Can . . . may I help you get things ready?"

"Grammy and I can do it faster by ourselves, dear."

"I wish Pris were home." Pris was my next older sister. She went to Radcliffe. Our oldest sister, Liz, had graduated and gotten married.

"We all miss Pris, but she's having a good time on her own, isn't she?"

"Grammy, will you read me a story?"

"Not right now, dear."

As I started upstairs, I remembered the letter. "Oh, Mother! Miss Coffin sent you a note." She put it in her apron pocket, which might or might not be a good sign.

I went to my room and drew a picture of a white farmhouse on a hill. In back of it, I drew a purple line for mountains, and just on top of them I set a big orange-red sun. Carefully, I began to color the sky light pink at the bottom, and darker in the middle, and finally blue at the top. As I added a few dark clouds, I suddenly stopped. I was holding the crayon in my left hand. I looked at my farmhouse, perched peacefully on its green-gray hill. Two small tears spattered down on the page, smearing the sunset. I went into the bathroom, got a Kleenex, and tenderly blotted them off.

Ω

At quarter to seven, I was dressed in the blue smocked dress Grammy had made me, and sitting on Mother's bed, watching her screw her earrings tightly onto her ears.

"How come you don't get your ears pierced?" I asked.

"Good heavens, dear! Where did you get such a bohemian idea?"

Bohemian ideas seemed not to be good ones, so rather than get Pris in trouble by saying I'd gotten it from her, I changed the subject. "Can we go up to Vermont next weekend?"

"Possibly," she said. "That will be about the last time until next spring."

"The last time!"

"You forget," she said, "it's going to snow up there soon, and they don't plow the road to our house. We'll just shut it down for the winter, the way we do when we're in Michigan."

"Do you suppose it misses us when we're gone?"

Her reflection gave mine a gently reproving smile. "Do you *really* think a house can miss people?"

Did I *really* . . . ? I thought of coming in on weekends, sniffing the damp smell of unheated house as I hurried through the kitchen where the china lay behind glass doors, waiting to be used on the table that stood waiting to be set. Of running up the steep stairs to my room to find the old jeans and sweaters I wore in Vermont and nowhere else. Of hugging the chilly stuffed animals who had been waiting patiently for me to take them out of their silent rows. Thoughts like that made it hard to say houses couldn't miss people, though even I knew that was supposed to be the truth. But rather than risk lying any more, I said, "Well, *I* miss *it*—all the time."

"I know you do." Mother sighed, and I waited for her to remind me Harvard was Important in a way Vermont somehow wasn't—but she was absorbed in placing her silver combs behind her ears, making her hair puff out over her earrings.

"Mommy, you're so pretty."

"Why, thank you, Peggy." She turned around and smiled, a smile like Grammy's, from deep inside her eyes. When she smiled like that, she looked very fragile, and younger than I was. "Shall we do your braids?"

I sat in front of the mirror and watched her hands part my

hair into scraggly blond strands. "Your bangs are crooked, aren't they?" she said. "Shall I . . . ?"

"People will be here before you're done," I said quickly. My hair was straight and fine, and when she tried to even my bangs out, they slipped away from her scissors until they were so short they stuck out in a little fringe.

"All right." She glanced at the clock and braided fast, pulling the little wispies that grew down my neck. "There!" she said, dissatisfied. They were already beginning to slip out, but there was no time to fix them, let alone ask her about Miss Coffin's note, even if I had dared. The doorbell was ringing.

Dinner was served at eight. The guests were arranged boy-girl-boy-girl around the table ("so the men won't just talk to each other"), down to the corner where I sat on Mother's left. There were lots of people there. The man next to Grammy was Mr. Steiner, a psychologist— "one of those people who think everything we do has to do with sex," Mother had explained earlier. One could only pity him. In our family, man was a rational creature, and sex was what dogs did. Then there were some people from the Classics Department, who all looked alike, even their wives, and Mr. Zander. Mr. Zander taught English. He wrote novels instead of real books, but they must have been pretty good, because the Great Man said it wasn't every day young writers got tenure at Harvard. The important thing about him, though, was that he had a summer place in Vermont, and we had been staying with him there when he'd persuaded the Great Man to buy ours. Ever since then he'd been my special friend, and tonight he was sitting next to me. He was wearing a blue tie with bulldogs on it, and some words on little shields. I stared at the letters as the Great Man carved the roast.

Mr. Zander smiled. "Can you read yet, Peggy?"

"Sure. I'm in the Highest Group."

"Well, can you read this?" He held out the tie so I could see it better.

I spelled it out carefully. "The first word is lux. Then et. Then veri . . . veritas."

"Good for you," he said, his blue eyes crinkling behind his glasses. "Do you know what it means?"

All the guests were smiling as they waited for me to admit that I didn't, but I could do a little better than that. "It's Latin," I said. "And *veritas* is on all the notebooks here, so it must have something to do with Harvard."

"You're absolutely right, my little classicist," he said. "It means *truth*, which Harvard purports to value. But this is Yale, which also values *lux*. Which means . . . ?"

"Well," I hazarded, "it sounds like *luck*, but—"

"—Luck and Truth!" he said, delighted. "Marvelous!"

Everybody laughed, and I joined in, but I didn't really feel like it. If truth was as big a deal at Harvard and Yale as it was in the Bible, luck wasn't going to do me much good. I looked down at my napkin.

In my hideout, thick green moss grew over the top, but next to that was a brown, thinner kind that had fairy cups sprouting out of it after it rained. Then there was a taller, leafier kind that smelled like mint when you crushed it, and finally a ground-pine that looked like cactus—or might, if you were very small. I weeded around it and made a little track through it. Hundreds of ants passed back and forth on my track, carrying white eggs in their mouths. I wondered if they thought they were in a desert.

Mr. Zander's hand fell on my shoulder. "Hey!" he whispered. "Come back to us!"

"See?" Mother was saying in the bright tone she used when she pretended nothing was wrong, "She just slips away."

"Well, she comes by it honestly," said Mr. Zander, smiling as he looked down the table to the Great Man's abstracted face.

"Where do you go when you slip away, Peggy?"

"Vermont." Where else would anyone go?

He kissed me on the forehead, which sort of surprised me. "Vermont," he said. "*Veritas* indeed—and not on a notebook, either. You're a discerning child."

"She's more than that," Mother said, sighing. "I just got a note from her school, saying she's been telling everyone that Edward is a farmer and we live in Vermont. Not just the children—her teacher, and even the principal!"

I stole a glance at Grammy, but she looked busy with her roll, and maybe she really was. She didn't hear very well when lots of people were talking at once. Next to her, though, Mr. Steiner stopped looking bored and stared at me through his funny glasses, and the Classics wife on his far side seemed to be interested, too.

In Vermont, I thought desperately, there's a Model A in the barn cellar. It's rusted apart, but you can still open the door . . . it was no good. Everybody was looking at me now, so I knew I was going to be The Subject of Discussion. That was what happened in our family when you did something terrible, unless the Great Man noticed—in which case he roared at you, and you cried and stopped doing it. Generally, though, it was women who noticed terribleness, and since it was unbecoming for women to raise their voices, we handled things this way.

Because there were so many people, the Discussion was quite lively and a little hard to follow. From what I could gather, the school had said that lying could imply a serious emotional disturbance, which some people said was the case and others said was the kind of cant you got from schools these days. Then there was some stuff about guilt and self-punishment that made me wonder who had told Mother I was pinching myself, but I never found out, because Mr. Steiner was talking loudly about a dreadful condition that started with "skits" and had something to do

with dreaming off. Meanwhile, people were passing heaped-up plates to each other—all the way around the table, the way they always seemed to—and filling each others' glasses, and by the time everybody was served, the only clear result was that as these things went, I was getting off lightly. The guests, though interested in my condition, seemed unconcerned by the depths of my depravity; the Great Man hadn't been paying attention; and Grammy had drifted off to someplace of her own where there was no loud laughing or smoking or drinking.

During the next few minutes, there was nothing but the hungry clanks of forks—no wonder, since it was 8:30 by now—interspersed with comments on how good everything was. Then one of the Classicists started talking about Stalin, Mrs. Steiner started talking about her exotic new hairdresser, and a bunch of little conversations started up. Just as I began to feel safe, I heard Mr. Zander say quietly, "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

When I turned to see who he was talking to, I saw he was looking at me with the kind of pitying smile you give to sinners before you shape them up. Well, I deserved it, but I felt a stab of betrayal. As a veteran Subject of Discussion, I knew there were some people who just *had* to add a little lecture of their own after everything was over. But it hurt to think that Mr. Zander, third in line after God and Grammy, was one of them. The food on my plate blurred as I looked down at it.

"That's what I was afraid of," he said softly, handing me his handkerchief. "Listen, Peggy. Don't let them get you down. You've pulled off a magnificent feat."

I stared at him over the perfect white folds. "I what?"

"You've done something extraordinary."

"I *have*?"

"Shh," he said, glancing around the table. "You'll start them off again. But yes. You've told a story that has held the attention of a whole school for six weeks. That's just—amazing."

The way my mouth dropped open would have made him think I was a total retard if the Classics wife on his right hadn't rescued me by asking him a question about Stalin. As it was, I had time to pull myself together before he turned back to me.

"Now then," he said—softly again— "as I was saying, you're a wonder."

Maybe I wasn't as together as I thought. "But didn't you understand . . . ?"

"I understood enough to realize you told a fantastic story."

"But it wasn't *true*," I said. "It was a lie. Like . . . like Stalin. And look—didn't he die? I thought it was a big deal—"

"—Yes, he died, and yes, it was a big deal, but no, what you told was *not* a lie like Stalin. It was a lie like . . . Odysseus."

"Odysseus? *He* was a liar?"

"A consummate liar. Of the highest order." He smiled at my shocked face. "Last time you and I talked about Odysseus, we were watching your family play croquet, and you were telling me the story of the Cyclops. Do you remember?"

I nodded. Of course I remembered. The sun had been just about ready to go down, the hermit thrushes had been singing in the woods, and the swallows had been racing over the mowing, diving and snapping at the last bugs of the evening.

"We didn't mention who tells that story in the poem—but do you know?"

"Sure. Odysseus tells it to a bunch of people at a dinner party."

"That's my girl," said Mr. Zander. "Now, tell me. Do you think the people at the dinner party believed the story?"

My eyes opened wide. "You mean, they didn't?"

"Well, let's see," he said. "Believing it involves believing that Odysseus and his men sailed to an island inhabited by many giants but met only one, that the one was so big that he could pick up two men, smash them together and eat them raw in a

couple of mouthfuls, that he spoke fluent Greek, that there was a log lying in the cave right where Odysseus needed it . . .”

“But if they had said those things, they would have wrecked the story!”

“So you’re saying they didn’t believe the details, but they believed in the story-ness of the story and they admired the skill of the man telling it?”

That seemed to be what he wanted me to have said, so while it was a lot more complicated than anything I could have come up with on my own, I said yes.

He smiled. “Fine. Now tell me—does everybody in your school *really* believe you live on a Vermont farm?”

“I . . .” Come to think of it, did they? They seemed to, but . . . “I don’t know.”

“C’mon, Peggy. It’s a public school, right?”

“What’s that have to do with it?”

“Everything. A public school is supported by town taxes, so it’s open only to kids who live in the town.”

“That sounds fair,” I began judiciously—then I saw what he was driving at. “You mean I couldn’t go to Mary Anderson Memorial if we didn’t live here?”

“Right. Now, most of your classmates, and certainly your teacher and your principal, know that. And yet—well, you tell me. When you talk about the way you live on ‘your’ farm in Vermont, what do they do? Call you a liar? Walk away?”

“No. They listen.”

“And why would they do that?”

“Because . . .” I thought of Mr. Kerry’s face, and even, sometimes, Miss Coffin’s. “Because they’re . . . interested.”

“You bet they are. This is undoubtedly the first time any of them have met a second-grader who can make life on a Vermont farm as real to them as Odysseus made the Cyclops real to the people at the dinner party.”

There was something he was missing. I couldn't quite figure out what it was, but it seemed so important that I objected instead of just shutting up. "Um . . . the life they're listening to isn't *mine*," I said. "It's sort of Joan's but not really. It's the life I . . . er . . . go to, like I did when you—"

"—Called you back?" He smiled as he took his handkerchief, but his eyes were serious. "Sure. That's why you can tell such a convincing story."

"But isn't going to a place like that . . . isn't that wrong? I mean, I *know* it's not real, but sometimes it's so much realer than . . ." I looked around the table. "Well, this. Or school. Isn't that skits o . . . whatever Mr. Steiner was saying?"

"No, no," he said, glancing anxiously across the table. "It's doing what you have to do when you don't quite fit into the puzzle you've got to live in. Unfortunately, the experts who classify the pieces of modern puzzles tend to think that a kid who can share her imaginary life in a way that makes her auditors hear a higher truth has something wr—" He broke off, his face a sudden mask of politeness as he looked past me at Mother. "Splendid dinner, Ellen," he said. "Absolutely perfect for the occasion."

"Oh, thank you!" she said, and I knew she was really pleased, because he was a fussy eater—only with adults, you had to call it a gourmet—and she'd been worried about cooking something he'd enjoy. "What are you two talking about so seriously?"

"The Vermont we have in common," he said. "And I was just about to suggest that Peggy write down some of her daydreams for other people to read."

"Oh, she can't," said Mother, quickly, ashamed. "We've just learned that her penmanship skills are way below grade level. I'm sure the problem is temporary, but . . ."

Mr. Zander looked from her to me. "A smart girl like you has trouble writing?"

"Only with my right hand," I said. "My left hand writes okay,

except sometimes it goes backwards. That's wrong, so at school I have to write with the hand you're supposed to write with—"

"—What!?" said Mr. Steiner, Mr. Zander, and Mother, almost at the same time. The next moment, Mother was asking me reproachfully why I hadn't *told* her, and everyone else was agreeing that making left-handed people write with their right hands was a holdover from the Victorians, who seemed to be right up there with the bohemians when it came to bad ideas. In the middle of the noise, the Great Man began to speak, and as usual when he had something to say, everybody hushed. He paused to light a cigarette, then gave me a benign smile from his end of the table. "Peggy," he said, "did you tell your teacher you can type?"

I shook my head. "It . . . it didn't seem to be the issue."

"Not the issue?" he said. I knew something was coming, because he was using the tone that meant he and I were secret conspirators against Rules, Women, or Theories, depending. Even so, I was dumbfounded when he began to explain—to everybody, now—that when he'd seen me writing backwards, he'd decided to try teaching me to type, to see if that would help me get used to seeing the way words were supposed to appear on the page. It was news to me that he knew I was left-handed, let alone that I wrote backwards. As for the lessons, I knew that if you wanted his attention you had to do something with him that he enjoyed, like typing, and you had to catch on fast or he got bored—but I had never dreamed I'd been helping him work out an educational idea. That was nifty, especially when he wound up by giving Mother the modest smile that meant he knew he was right. "Maybe you should talk to that teacher of hers, Ellen," he said. "Tell her Peggy uses all the right fingers, and she can do around forty words a minute copying—less, of course, if she has to think up spelling for herself."

A murmur of admiration went around the table, and as I

began to clear the plates, one of the Classicists said how smart it was to see past the problem of penmanship into the problem of written communication. That gave the Great Man an opportunity to say that typing helped with spelling too, because your fingers memorized the pattern of the letters, and everybody (including me) saw right away how true that was. By the time Mother had served up Grammy's special angel food cake, everybody was saying what a brilliant teacher the Great Man was, and that turned into talk about his wonderful new translation, with lots of readings from the advance copy of his new book, which I fetched from his study after carefully washing my hands. Then there were speeches and toasts in champagne for the guests and sparkling grape juice for Grammy and me, and finally, the guests went into the living room for coffee, which was my signal to say good night politely and to go upstairs.

I always approached the moment nervously, because while it usually just drew comments on how well brought up I was, sometimes one of the ladies (or worse, one of the old men) asked for a kiss good night, and then, of course, everybody else had to show they liked children, too, and I had to deliver kisses all round. Tonight, though, there were so many people and conversations that only Grammy said good night back, and I slipped upstairs without any comments at all.

It was cool and quiet in my room, and I undressed by the light of the street lamp outside. The voices from the party drifted into the bathroom as I brushed my teeth, and one of them was Mr. Zander's, talking quietly about a poor kid who was going to have a tough life. I listened a little more, but the only thing that floated upstairs was cigarette smoke, so I closed my door and crawled under my blankets.

You were supposed to be good to the unfortunate people in the world, so I said a special prayer for the kid who was going to have a tough life. Then for a little while, I thought about Odysseus

and puzzles, but I was too sleepy to figure it all out. Pulling my pillow over my head, I left Miss Coffin, Mary Anderson, and luck and truth all behind me, and slowly slipped into the real world, where I lay on a bed of green moss, sniffing the lemon smell of a crushed fern and listening to a white-throated sparrow sing its four sad notes in the humid sunlight.