I had begun to dislike my father. He was always angry about something. Wherever we went he got into arguments with people. But he didn't appear to frighten most people; they often just stared at him, calmly, and he became more furious. If we ate out, which was seldom, he always found something wrong with the food and sometimes refused to pay. "There's fly$#@% in this whipped cream! What the hell kind of a place is this?"

"I'm sorry, sir, you needn't pay. Just leave."

"I'll leave, all right! But I'll be back! I'll burn this god-damned place down!"

Once we were in a drug store and my mother and I were standing to one side while my father yelled at a clerk. Another clerk asked my mother, "Who is that horrible man? Every time he comes in here there's an argument."

"That's my husband," my mother told the clerk.

Yet, I remember another time. He was working as a milkman and made early morning deliveries. One morning he awakened me. "Come on, I want to show you something." I walked outside with him. I was wearing my pajamas and slippers. It was still dark, the moon was still up. We walked to the milk wagon which was horsedrawn. The horse stood very still. "Watch," said my father. He took a sugar cube, put it in his hand and held it out to the horse. The horse ate it out of his palm. "Now you try it …" He put a sugar cube in my hand. It was a very large horse. "Get closer! Hold out your hand!" I was afraid the horse would bite my hand off. The head came down; I saw the nostrils; the lips pulled back, I saw the tongue and the teeth, and then the sugar cube was gone.

"Here. Try it again …" I tried it again. The horse took the sugar cube and waggled his head. "Now," said my father, "I'll take you back inside before the horse $#@%s on you."

I was not allowed to play with other children. "They are bad children," said my father, "their parents are poor."

"Yes," agreed my mother. My parents wanted to be rich so they imagined themselves rich.

The first children of my age that I knew were in kindergarten. They seemed very strange, they laughed and talked and seemed happy. I didn't like them. I always felt as if I was going to be sick, to vomit, and the air seemed strangely still and white. We painted with watercolors. We planted radish seeds in a garden and some weeks later we ate them with salt. I liked the lady who taught kindergarten, I liked her better than my parents. One problem I had was going to the bathroom. I always needed to go to the bathroom, but I was ashamed to let the others know that I had to go, so I held it. It was really terrible to hold it. And the air was white, I felt like vomiting, I felt like $#@%ting and pissing, but I

didn't say anything. And when some of the others came back from the bathroom I'd think, you're dirty, you did something in there …The little girls were nice in their short dresses, with their long hair and their beautiful eyes, but I thought, they do things in there too, even though they pretend they don't.

Kindergarten was mostly white air …Grammar school was different, first grade to sixth grade, some of the kids were twelve years old, and we all came from poor neighborhoods. I began to go to the bathroom, but only to piss. Coming out once I saw a small boy drinking at a water fountain. A larger boy walked up behind him and jammed his face down into the water jet. When the small boy raised his head, some of his teeth were broken and blood came out of his mouth, there was blood in the fountain.

"You tell anyone about this," the older boy told him, "and I'll really get you." The boy took out a handkerchief and held it to his mouth. I walked back to class where the teacher was telling us about George Washington and Valley Forge. She wore an elaborate white wig. She often slapped the palms of our hands with a ruler when she thought we were being disobedient. I don't think she ever went to the bathroom. I hated her.

Each afternoon after school there would be a fight between two of the older boys. It was always out by the back fence where there was never a teacher about. And the fights were never even; it was always a larger boy against a smaller boy and the larger boy would beat the smaller boy with his fists, backing him into the fence. The smaller boy would attempt to fight back but it was useless. Soon his face was bloody, the blood running down into his shirt.

The smaller boys took their beatings wordlessly, never begging, never asking mercy. Finally, the larger boy would back off and it would be over and all the other boys would walk home with the winner. I'd walk home quickly, alone, after holding my $#@% all through school and all through the fight. Usually by the time I got home I would have lost the urge to relieve myself. I used to worry about that.

I didn't have any friends at school, didn't want any. I felt better being alone. I sat on a bench and watched the others play and they looked foolish to me. During lunch one day I was approached by a new boy. He wore knickers, was cross-eyed and pigeon-toed. I didn't like him, he didn't look good. He sat on the bench next to me.

"Hello, my name's David." I didn't answer.

He opened his lunch bag. "I've got peanut butter sandwiches," he said. "What do you have?"

"Peanut butter sandwiches."

"I've got a banana, too. And some potato chips. Want some potato chips?"

I took some. He had plenty, they were crisp and salty, the sun shone right through them. They were good. “Can I have some more?”

“All right.”

I took some more. He even had jelly on his peanut butter sandwiches. It dripped out and ran over his fingers. David didn’t seem to notice.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

“Virginia Road.”

“I live on Pickford. We can walk home together after school. Take some more potato chips. Who’s your teacher?”

“Mrs. Columbine.”

“I have Mrs. Reed. I’ll see you after class, we’ll walk home together.”

Why did he wear those knickers? What did he want? I really didn’t like him. I took some more of his potato chips.

That afternoon, after school, he found me and began walking along beside me. “You never told me your name,” he said. “Henry,” I answered.

As we walked along I noticed a whole gang of boys, first graders, following us. At first they were half a block behind us, then they closed the gap to several yards behind us.

“What do they want?” I asked David.

He didn’t answer, just kept walking.

“Hey, knicker-$#@%ter!” one of them yelled. “Your mother make you $#@% in your knickers?”

“Pigeon-toe, ho-ho, pigeon-toe!”

“Cross-eye! Get ready to die!” Then they circled us.

“Who’s your friend? Does he kiss your rear end?”

One of them had David by the collar. He threw him onto a lawn. David stood up. A boy got down behind him on his hands and knees. The other boy shoved him and David fell over backwards. Another boy rolled him over and rubbed his face in the grass. Then they stepped back. David got up again. He didn’t make a sound but the tears were rolling down his face. The largest boy walked up to him. “We don’t want you in our school, sissy. Get out of our school!” He punched David in the stomach. David bent over and as he did, the boy brought his knee up into David’s face. David fell. He had a bloody nose.

Then the boys circled me. “Your turn now!” They kept circling and as they did I kept turning. There were always some of them behind me. Here I was loaded with $#@% and I had to fight. I was terrified and calm at the same time. I didn’t understand their motive. They kept circling and I kept turning. It went on and on. They screamed things at me but I didn’t hear what they said.

Finally they backed off and went away down the street. David was waiting for me. We walked down the sidewalk toward his place on Pickford Street.

Then we were in front of his house.

“I’ve got to go in now. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, David.”

He went in and then I heard his mother’s voice. “David! Look at your knickers and shirt! They’re torn and full of grass stains! You do this almost every day! Tell me, why do you do it?”

David didn’t answer.

“I asked you a question! Why do you do this to your clothes?”

“I can’t help it, Mom …”

“You can’t help it? You stupid boy!”

I heard her beating him. David began to cry and she beat him harder. I stood on the front lawn and listened. After a while the beating stopped. I could hear David sobbing. Then he stopped.

His mother said, “Now, I want you to practice your violin lesson.”

I sat down on the lawn and waited. Then I heard the violin. It was a very sad violin. I didn’t like the way David played. I sat and listened for some time but the music didn’t get any better. The $#@% had hardened inside of me. I no longer felt like $#@%ting. The afternoon light hurt my eyes. I felt like vomiting. I got up and walked home.