

A VISITATION

TAP TAP...

Enter!

Hey. How're ya doing?

Oh...fair-to-middling, I guess...

[He's sitting as he always did, on his reclining chair, facing the door. A blanket across his legs, his book lowered to his lap..."Vanity Fair". Behind him the walls are a mosaic of framed pictures...Iceland scenes, friends' paintings, Lenin exhorting in 1917, Renoir's 'Boating Party', a Hiroshige print.]

I see you put the gopher Strategic Defense Screen down in the tomato bed..?

Yeah, those bastards are in for a shock this year. I wanted to shovel that soil back in there but...I had to quit. Didn't seem to have any 'oomph' today.

Why not wait till Saturday when I could help? That's a lot of work for a guy in his eighties.

It's not my age, it's the goddamn cancer Rick.

Well, sure. But you still get a lot done. I see your toaster-shelf is up.

Yeah, and it's just the ticket. That's Cape Canaveral, my launch zone.

[I take my usual seat in his oaken captain's chair. Out the window to the right, the tendrils of Scarlet-Runner beans creep up the twine to the roof. His brother Joe sent them last year, and now they form Item 3 on the weekly phone agenda. Item 2 is Gophers. Item 1...politics. Out the other window, the pleasant view of the neighbor's apple tree, and the redwoods beyond.]

Are you looking at those redwoods? How the hell do they grow so straight? They're perfectly plumb... line them up with the window jamb...see? Or, here, take this level, I put it up there today and sighted along those trunks...and by god they're right on the money! It's the damnedest thing.

Yes, they **are** perfect. Funny how your eye gets so good at that.

Mmmhmm, your eye can be damn close. But: once I had a homeowner walk into a bedroom where I had just finished building the closet door opening...had made the jambs, hung the doors, & nailed up the casings, when he walked in and instead of being pleased or surprised, he stares frowning and says "ARE YOU SURE THAT'S LEVEL? IT SURE DOESN'T LOOK LEVEL." It made me sore right away, but I gave him an out. "Oh yeah, it's level, could be an optical illusion?" But he's stubborn: "NO. THAT CAN'T BE LEVEL." So I just took my time. Got the six-foot level, put it up on the header, beckoned him over & asked him to read the bubble. Right on the money.

"OH WELL. I COULD HAVE SWORN...?"

Great! It's always fun to leave your level on cabinets when you've installed them perfectly. Hope the homeowners look at the bubble that night. Then too I hide my levels when I've had to" compromise"...

So...how goes it today, Rick,? How did you make out?

Oh...pretty well. I got that cabinet scribed to the fireplace.

Terrific. How did you solve that?

I made this little guide for a stub of pencil..? here... It was good for the deep indentations of stone.

Hey, that's keen. You have to save that....Couldn't you also have made a template?

Well yeah... it would have been more accurate, but we didn't have any good material to make one out of. Anyway I would've had to get the rock edge on the template somehow, so....

Oh yeah, true, you'd still need this to scribe the template.

I love that, *scribe the template*. That goes back a few millenia. We're only just mimicking the real crazy edge of things.

Yah...but at some point you have to stop fussing and just...fuck it, nail it.

By the way, what happened with that mistake that had you so upset last night?

Oh...That was a near thing. I told you I had that 15/8" screw blow through to a finished surface? Well I took all of the boy's green crayons this morning...you know that crazy woman ordered cabinets with a simulated malachite finish. It looks terrible now we've mounted all the cabinets. Overpowering.

Some people have a skewed sense of taste. They're spending a hundred grand and ending up with a kitchen worse than the old one.

Yeah. We had a client once order a "cracked & stressed" antique finish on cabinets. When they were in place, it looked like there had been a fire... Horrible. Then she tried to sue! A specialty painter had to come out and repaint all of it.

Imagine that, suing a tradesman for your own blunder. I find that hard to

Uh-oh. Did I ever tell you...when I was first become a foreman...?..I would try to spice up our lunch conversations with politics. Often some guy would voice an outrageous opinion, something like "DID YOU KNOW THAT HITLER IS STILL ALIVE IN CHILE?" I had fallen into a habit of saying "I find that hard to believe..." I was trying to steer us back to reason without antagonizing the guilty party. But I guess it began to grate on those guys because after a while they'd mime me or anticipate & say it just before I did. One day I had to tell them we were supposed to have a wall ready to pour by next day. There were growls and mutterings, so I felt I had to exhort the crew, give them the old St. Crispin's Day speech..I finished by saying "Each man can put up ten sheets of plywood easily..." there was a pause, and then Al saying: "WELL. I FIND THAT HARD TO BELIEVE." They damned-near laughed me out of the shack!

Hah! It came back on you like a wet towel!

Yes, I deserved it. I saw in a flash how pompous it sounded. It was that Party training, you had to be like the schoolmaster of the workers. It reminds me...when I was just twenty-one, I had joined the YCL, and they took a group of us who worked in heavy industry for a week of education in the basics of Marxism. We were the future proletarian leadership... young and not very literate. They spent the whole week giving us the Big Ideas of socialism, and inflaming us about the evils of capitalism. Then they pounded on the idea that our new understanding should make us see how important it was to organize our fellow workers. How you have to work side-by-side to really have influence. The last day they asked us what we had learned. There was this country fellow, from Missouri, he had been especially wrought-up about the way the bosses would even cheat you out of pennies on your pay. He jumped up and said with eyes glistening: "I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I LEARNED! I AM NEVER EVER GONNA WORK ANOTHER DAY FOR THOSE SONOFABITCH CAPITALISTS... FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE!" The education directors dropped their heads in defeat.

Oh god. None of that 'boring from within' for him!

No. He was kicking cold turkey. But say, what happened about your screw damage story?

Well...I got there early and started fooling with the green crayons, and put a clamp on it to press the bulge back flush. Then some dark pencil lines to confuse the edges of the fill. It looked...OK..but it was right at eye level. Then the others showed up and no one noticed. I started the upper cabinet run...put the first one up on that side...and damned if it didn't just cover that screw damage! It was invisible, after all that.

Oh for Christ's sakes. Well you know, that's when we're most creative, when we fuck up. Did I tell you about the guy who cut up the door? A man just sent out from the Union Hall to hang doors. A fancy front door was delivered and he started to adapt it to the old doorway..and cut it six inches short! Catastrophic, no way to fix it. The boss was due to visit later on, so he took out his skilsaw and cut that beautiful oak door into ten pieces & threw them in the trunk of his car. When the boss showed up, he said the door had never been delivered! He knew it would be figured out later, but just wanted to avoid the confession & humiliation. Of course he didn't show up next morning... but am I keeping you from your shower..?

No, no, there's no hurry. What could be more important? Besides we're not finished with the Agenda. We're still on Fuck-ups. I'm thinking how much I hate to confess. I'll do almost anything to conceal my crime. Some kind of image of ourselves as 99.9% sterling. Is it from the movies or superhero comics? 'Hammerman to the rescue'?

[How can I tell him how glad I am to see him again? Maybe he'll vanish if I do. We're right in our comfort zone, the endless post-mortem of the All-Job-One –World-Working-Talking-Blues. It's as close as I can get to sitting with him and his crew in the "2AM Club" tying-one-on after work..... in his heyday, the 1950s.]

*Well, drama has a lot to do with it. You know I've always said there was a method-acting school for apprentices...One of the classes teaches you how to explode when you make a mistake. How to swear with the vehemence of someone who has never made one before. Consternated outrage: " **What?**" None of the sniveling or mewling in a phrase like: "**Oh god no!**" Even if it's just a hammer mark you have to make it sound like it's the first one... Throw your hammer across the room: "**Get away from***

me thou treacherous tool!” Gnash your teeth, look up at the gods with an accusing glare. I’m telling you, carpenters have to be very talented.

You also told me there was going to be a Nuremburg Trial for carpenters some day.

Yeah ...that was after the job on Russian Hill, when I told the superintendent we hadn’t put the required re-bar in the corner foundation, and he blew me off. I had a vision of taking the witness stand and having to confess...that although it was an order from my Superior, I should have disobeyed and saved a hundred of those poor crushed souls who were standing by the southeast corner of the building when it collapsed. I still worry about it.

I should think the statute of limitations is beyond you now. But I know one contractor who will have to be in the Dock on that day. Jerry Cott.

Oh Jesus, One-Nail Cott! You know how he got that nickname, right? He told carpenters not to waste nails in framing, just one sixteen in each end of two-by-fours...so it was said you could walk along one of his frame walls and spin the studs. He was in a class all by himself.

Didn’t he eventually do Time?

Yeah, that was after he broke into the County yard and stole the bulldozer. His mother did too I think, she was cooking the books for him.

At the Nuremburg, I can bring two witnesses on Cott’s case. One would be a guy I knew in grade school who worked five years for him. He defended Cott as a “smart, wild, kick-ass guy.” He told me he enjoyed trying to outwit those twits in the County Building Dept. Said Cott was always good to *him*.

Sure, they were loyal to each other, they were in so deep.

Well then there’s witness #2. A carpenter who told me it was morally intolerable. He quit after being asked to cheat so often. Said they had three houses to build on three lots down a hill. Same building plan, same foundation for each, & they started them a month apart so the work could go on from one to the next. When the first foundation was ready, the inspector saw all the correct rebar etcetera, and signed off. Cott told the crew then to remove all the steel and place it in the footings for the second foundation. The first one got poured with no steel! Then the same thing happened on the next one. Only the last house had rebar in the foundation.

So that’s it. I worked on a house of his years ago. The foundation was leaking, riddled with ‘honeycombs’. We started breaking away the bad concrete, expecting to have trouble with rebar...and there wasn’t any. Kept going, a three-foot hole. It’s amazing really. Did he save any money when you consider the effort of moving that whole web down the hill...? And think of the concrete crew, nobody saying a word.

He reminds me of your old employer, Grueber.... As long as we’re on this item: Crackpot Contractors.

One of the immortals, no doubt. He drove me nuts. But like your old friend that worked for Cott, there was a fascination too. It was something to just see the High Jinks that guy would perform. Once we were driving through town and he was speeding. Cop pulled him over and I saw this coming: he couldn’t shut up, he was complaining about the ticket, threatening to go over the cop’s head. The cop

just walked around the car, wrote up a bad taillight, a turn signal problem. Grueber was furious. The cop said “keep it up fella, now how about your registration?” I had to yank his shoulder to break him away from it. With him, everything was a drive to beat the system about money. Getting a deal, manipulating people. It usually went so far that it boomeranged. Like the Arboretum in Golden Gate park...

You know it’s a wonderful feeling to walk through that park and turn to a friend & say my Dad worked on that fountain...

Well, not just the fountain, all the walkways and steps...we had miles of curbing to pour and needed bendable redwood form boards, a shitload of them. Grueber ordered something off a railroad car, “a fantastic saving” and they delivered a huge load..of eight-foot knotty one-by-four. It was useless. Couldn’t bend without snapping, wasn’t long enough to make the big curves. A total loss.

I only had one experience with him like that. When you got me on the crew the summer after my last year of high school. We were landscaping the long stretch of Portola Ave in the City. He had just gotten a big delivery of plants, and ordered me to stay the night with them to prevent a theft. So I’m huddled in my Volkswagen up near Twin Peaks, in a parking lot with hundreds of potted plants, in the wind & fog, shivering all night, and trying to imagine what in hell I would do if somebody came up with a truck to haul away the plants. Once in a while thinking something was screwy about this.

That madman! He was saving money there somehow, like not paying for a guard, or storage?

I recently had a dream about you & Grueber. Or at least someone like Grueber...
Wanta hear it?

Yeah, sure...

We are at a banquet in a setting more like seventy years ago. At the home of this contractor for whom you have worked many years. The dining room is wainscoted and rich in furnishings, with a chandelier. The occasion is a kind of annual dinner with bonuses and speeches. We’re also celebrating the completion of a building that you had supervised, and which finished up successfully.

The contractor is a bright, shifty, almost crazy guy who is reveling in being the center of attention. He’s making a speech, praising you and the execution of the job. There’s a note of condescension in it; the Lord of the manor deigns to thank his Steward. But also a little of his conniving aspect shows. He is thinking about the profit he made on the job versus how modestly he has had to pay you.

I was proud of you but from having worked for the firm myself, I knew how sleazy the guy could be. How much one had to “put up with” daily in his temperament and dishonesty. So it made me a little uncomfortable to see how much you were basking in the light of the praise.

Later there is a scene in our family’s house. This too is an old Victorian home with dark wood paneling and good quality wooden furniture. It seems that my Icelandic grandparents are still living and we all live in one house. Quite a few of your family members are in the one room with your father, Isak, at the center. He looks like he does in photographs from around the time he was in his late seventies. A little like John Huston: wearing a black three-piece suit, with a keen, squinty look and white hair. He is re-telling, for those who were not present, all the events of the dinner.

Isak takes his time narrating. He mesmerizes us while painting the scene of the contractor praising you. He feels proud of you, but he also wants us to see what kind of man this contractor is. And, in the telling, he himself shines with dignity, in such a way that you know if you think it through, that he would never have found himself in that position.

After the rest of us leave, I see as a remote viewer a scene taking place in the room we have left, between you and your dad. You start pacing back and forth, and I see that you are nearly weeping. You turn to the old man: *“they will never look at me that way, they revere you...”* The undercurrent of the old man’s speech was of course not lost on you.

The old man is reluctant to speak with you. Finally he does: *“It’s too bad you need so much to be the Good Soldier. The problem is: being divided in soul. Acting a part, ignoring the truth-perceiver inside you.”*

There is a pause as you keep pacing and holding back tears. Then you say: *“You’re wrong about soldiering.”* (at this moment I saw a flash of you in uniform, a 19th Century Lieutenant’s dress uniform...you cut quite a figure.) *“When I was a soldier, THAT is when I felt fused, like a 100% all-out human being. It was only then that I was not divided from my self.”* I woke up at that point...

Hmmmm...It sounds a little like a James Joyce short story. Kind of painful for me to hear Rick. Of course, I was never in the Army. And you know Grueber would never have wasted a dime on a company dinner!

It’s just an angle on our lives, maybe about myself more than you. I worked twelve years for a contractor who I saw in that light at times...that I was compromised. Praised for excellent work yet knowing I was still a donkey. I wasn’t ever a foreman either, never took on that kind of responsibility. I think sometimes that you look at me with a little pity & disappointment.

Not true!

Well anyway, I woke up sort of in love with the dream, not thinking how your honor or mine have been sullied in the trade. It just seemed like a wonderful story to have lived through. Especially that last scene where I had a periscope into your private talk with your dad. You were really impressive. Like Brando...the suffering in your speech and the pacing, the overlay of an image of your uniform... You did *too* have a uniform though. That time in the Merchant Marine, the First Mate’s uniform. I have those photos, they must have been the template for the dream image. You were stunning.

We weren’t truly combatants though. The War raged around us, we were delivering supplies into the Philippines...but they never attacked us.

You know, my Dad, Isak, was an impressive carpenter. I often felt that I was just a shadow of what he was. He went off to Copenhagen and did the full seven year apprenticeship. The last year they had to do a master’s piece. He was assigned a great spiral staircase in a government building. Had to do everything. Draw the plans, select the wood and have it milled, do all the carpentry and then even the staining & lacquering. I mean, I’m just a wood butcher in comparison. I always felt better about myself as a seaman. Passing my First Mate’s exam, learning navigation...I loved all of it. And I found I was good at command as well. I think as a leftie I was more in tune with the able-bodied seamen.

Now I'm in the same boat...excuse the lame joke. I mean I was not headed for carpentry either but now here I am thirty years into it and I really think I'm in your shadow. Much less talented. Is this the way of things? Diluting the legacy?

You're wrong, you're a terrific craftsman. I could never do finish work like you.

That's just because I'm nearsighted!

Well, anyway, a guy gets married, kids are on the way... and you have to settle. I was at sea when you were born. We had a big party for your birth...everyone drunk on homebrew and wishing you to grow up a world-beater. By the time you were two I realized I had to come ashore for good. I was missing out on your childhood.

Yeah, I joined the union when I decided to get married. Probably, like you, it was just so familiar to me because it was what my Dad did, what I had done when helping you over the years. Do you regret not staying in the maritime life?

Hmmm. I missed it for awhile. There's more pizzazz to that life. I loved coming into a port like Sydney or Singapore and hiking all over the city. You know I always had a special feeling for the Orient. Well, for one thing, I lost my virginity in Japan. It was my first trip to Yokohama and my older brother had told me about this geisha house & even told me who to ask for. That was a wonderful beginning. I loved standing watch and gazing out over the sea for hours. Did I tell you I once saw a manta ray lift up out of the water and slap the surface like a cannon shot?

Yes, you did. I used to ask for those stories over & over at bedtime. Anything from those days. I'd just say "tell me about when you went to sea" Especially the creatures. The poisonous sea snake that you shot off New Guinea. And anything about China.

My first trip to Shanghai changed my way of thinking. It was 1933 and conditions were awful there. There were so many beggars and destitute people. The Kuomintang was massacring the Maoists, and they would sell postcards of beheadings in the street. I met a Chinese passenger on board who was a clandestine Red. He described for me how desperate the poverty was, how there was going to be a revolution. It was stirring. You know, we were right in the worst of the Depression back home and I and my brothers had scattered all over to get work. I think being in China then convinced me that socialism was the answer. There was a day when I was on watch & most of the crew & officers were ashore. My duty was to watch out for thieves. Men would scurry up the mooring ropes or gangways, rush on deck and grab anything then jump overboard. I saw a man unscrew a single brass screw and leap overboard with it. Probably worth a couple of days' food. So I went up into our storeroom and got a fifty-pound sack of rice. Took it to the railing and beckoned to the sampans. The first one close to the side, I dropped the bag in his boat. Damned near swamped him. The others tried to get it away, but he got out of there. I was nuts to do it, who knows what happened to him....

"Man's Fate" was written about that same period in Shanghai, wasn't it?

[Right here the worlds are intersecting and I'm in pain. "Man's Fate" was what I chose to place inside his coffin at the funeral. Along with his oldest hammer. I always connected that book with my Dad. An old friend at the service told me that when I was two, she would go with my Mom & with her same-age daughter to do things in San Francisco. When the car reached the Golden Gate Bridge and one could see the Pacific out to the West, I would start

a little chant, pointing at the ocean..."MINKDADDY, MINKDADDY, MINKDADDY" and her daughter would join in . She thought the name of the sea was minkdaddy. It was his nickname: Mink.]

Yes, that was a hell of a book. And that's another thing I loved about being at sea. I had so much time to read. That's when I got this habit. Always need to have a few books lined up ahead of me.

What was like that for me was jail. That's when I got my good reading habit going. Nothing like being locked up and no distractions. I feel that way too when I get sick or have been injured. I almost welcome the flu when I realize I can just stay in bed and read all day.

Well see if you can catch some of this cancer..I'm in a hell of a good run of reading.

Are you staying with the English for a while?

Yes...but I just found a copy of The Idiot in your bookcase, maybe I'll re-read that, it's been fifty years... Remember that fantastic scene when the woman holds up the bundle of 300,000 rubles and threatens to throw it into the fireplace? How those guys twist & turn in the wind as their greed overpowers them. Jesus that's a terrific book.

I do faintly recall it...How do you always remember so much of books you've read? It's amazing to me. Even though I read with intensity and love a book like that, if you asked me "what's it about?" I'd probably fumble with it. It doesn't leap back into vivid detail as it does for you.

Don't know. But Ingi was the real genius in our family at memory & reciting. Did you ever hear him do the "Lady of Shallot"?

No...but once I was with you and your brothers at Ivar's restaurant in Ballard. You guys had about five whiskeys and then goaded Ingi to tell some tale. I was mesmerized. He was reciting a long ballad, completely soused...and it was beautiful. Wasn't your Mom like that as well?

Sure. Jakobina embarrassed us that way when we were young lads. Once I had a buddy over and we were about to leave the house on some great adventure. My mom started asking the guy if he liked literature. I was grimacing and trying to short-circuit her. She persisted, and Simonson got interested. She told him about Burns and recited "To a Louse" ..I was squirming and rolling my eyes, trying to pull Simonson out the door; but to my surprise he was enjoying it and pushed me off. It still bugs me today that I was so disrespectful of my Mother's talent. Well, it was that "American Kid" that was coming to the fore in all us brothers...we were embarrassed that our folks were old-country. The elders had a word for it: "bandarikja drengi" ... something like that. But that gift for recitation and yarn-spinning, that's deep in the Icelandic community.

I still have a grievance with you for telling me, 'no need to come to her funeral'. You were saying, *Oh just a bunch of old-timers...boring stuff*. But then you said later they had all these Icelanders turn out in traditional costume and recited old poems. I'd have loved it. Why'd you do that?

Oh shit. I don't know. We brothers were drinking heavily, Rick. Maybe I just didn't want you to see us. And well... it was pretty boring.

But I'd never before even heard Icelandic spoken. And it would have been something to have seen how much she was revered for her poetry. I felt like your buddy Simonson in that story...

I know you're right. I was addled. It was still three years before I was able to kick the booze. It was getting pretty fuckin bad.

You're telling me. It got so I would only visit you in the morning. You had a kind of stifled drunkenness the rest of the day. It wasn't much fun to be around...sometimes you were very harsh. I felt bad bringing the boys around at times like that.

You know what tipped me over don't you? It was your son, at twelve, saying he didn't really want to see me if I was just going to be drunk. That was it.

Around your seventieth birthday wasn't it?

Nearabouts. I just stopped dead, cold turkey. It wasn't easy.

I still think that was one of the noblest things you ever did. I kept expecting you to backslide, but the years ticked off and you stayed your course. Even though you had moved into an apartment and were alone a lot.

I just set some routines. Make a loaf of bread every week. Squire Charlotte to a movie every Wednesday. Do some little job for my old friends... Remember, I worked in that Leftie bookstore almost every day. Did it bother you that I was back around the old Party comrades?

No...I didn't agree with you, but I could see it was your 'village', your support. You liked to make things into a Job. Your routines are embedded all over this little cottage. I see the bread pans, the little repairs and putterings you were always doing here.

Well there is something to that idea that when you stop making your bed or washing dishes, you're on the way out. Like that little story that came back with the Spanish Civil War vets. They'd say about the Spanish troops that if they ran from battle it was a retreat. But if they tossed their hair oil and combs too, it was a rout.

And by the way, you forgot to mention the routine of eating a half gallon of ice cream every day!

Oh jesus, yeah, it was that or whiskey, you know, same sort of craving.

I remember bringing the boys over and you'd get out a brick of ice cream and just cut it in three pieces with a butcher knife. Their eyes would bug out as you dropped those slabs in their dishes.

Then we'd play poker. Were you there when Dino was so funny? He was what, six? Just getting to know poker. We were betting with pennies. He was trying to figure out how you were supposed to act when it was your turn to bet. One time I turned to him and said "it's five pennies to you Dino: what's your call?" And he held his breath a while and then got real serious and kind of quietly said; "I bluff"! What a funny little fellow he was then.

None of us will ever forget it. Part of it was the great way you had of making those games so serious, as if the boys were fellow shipmates. You never talked down to kids.

Well that's how I grew up. Nobody ever talked down to the Johnson boys. They'd get a punch in the nose.

Oh sure, when you were six years old!

You know, until Joe came along I was the baby brother. I had to stand up for myself, those three big brothers were always tough. But man if anyone tried to give me a bad time they'd have three hellions to deal with in minute. I was always tagging along with the Big Guys. Once we went swimming with some neighborhood kids at the mill pond. I fell in and bumped my head on a log and Ingi had to pull me out. I guess I was unconscious for awhile and when I came to, my underwear was hanging up to dry and it had a little shitstain on it. The older guys started raggin me & one guy came up and said, "What happened there little Haruldur?" I said "aww, my little brother done that.." They laughed for hours. I got that back at me the rest of my growing up. "Your little brother do that then?"

Well, they probably gave you credit for quick thinking.

They all knew my little brother was one year old, that's what made it so funny.

Hearing about you & your brothers was my second favorite of your stories when I was little. Being an only child, I craved that kind of companionship. And the wildness of your adventures.

When Joe got a little older, he & I were a little team. We banded together and did things away from the Big Guys. Our best adventure was when I was maybe ten & Johann six. We were hiking along the Ballard Locks and found an old beat-up boat. The bottom was cracked and it was clearly abandoned. We decided to 'keep' it. There was a rope on the prow so we hauled it for hours downstream out towards the Sound until we got to a protected beach. Then we'd go down there and dream up adventures sitting in it. Sometimes we'd bring down some wood from the house and try to fix it. One day Konnie saw us and then the Big Guys got interested. They sort of took over, repaired it until it was able to float. It was a good-sized rowboat. Finally they decided to make a first voyage. This was all secret from the family. On the appointed day, we brought down food and set off for the far shore of Bainbridge Island. Must have been four miles. Can you imagine how nuts we were? Joe was only six!

I find that hard to believe.

Ha! But it's true. We were little vikings you know, raised on stories from the sagas. Anyway, we made the opposite shore and had a great time over there. Started a big campfire and had a meal. Then we headed back. The sea was rougher, we were tired, and the boat started taking in water badly. By the time we got to within a hundred yards of the beach, the boat was going down! We bailed wildly, rowed madly but it sank in the surf. Konnie grabbed Joe who couldn't swim, and then we swam for it. Somehow we all made it in. Puget Sound is cold, but we had grown up taking swims out there. It was late too, getting dark.

What about Isak? You couldn't hide all those wet clothes?

Yeah, we had to tell him. An odd thing though; he never punished us for that one. We expected the razor strop...but I think he was a little proud of us.

The razor strop.

Yes, that was always hanging in the hall. We hated it. Once Ingi stole it and buried it. But Dad just got another one. Did you know that we brothers made a solemn vow when we were teenagers, never to hit our kids? Yeah. None of us ever broke that vow, it stopped with his generation.

I'm grateful of course. But your Look was like a whipstroke. You scared the hell out of me.

Hmmmmnn. I guess the pugilist in you never quite goes away. We were all boxers. When that punk mugged me a couple of years ago as I was getting on the bus, I turned on him and planted one right in his face. Knocked him on his ass. He wasn't expecting that from an old man. Got my wallet though, I couldn't run after him.

[He flared in the telling of this last story. Even though he was five years gone, it seemed to me that if somebody crossed him right now they would get a punch in the nose. I'm still a little scared of him.]

But damnit Rick, I'm keeping you from your family...and we covered everything on our Agenda, didn't we? Go, take your shower. Your hair is full of sawdust too.

Yeah, I had to drill some holes in the lam-beam for wiring this afternoon. Electrician forgot one circuit.

Oh hell. What's the matter with those guys? They're supposed to be the geniuses. Remember that time Al Weber told me to go ahead and cut that cable? Son of a bitch!

Yeah, I was standing right there. You convulsed and literally flew backward, up in the air, landed against the opposite wall. Guess he was wrong?

Yeah, I was always leery of wiring after that. But go, Rick...I'm getting tired now anyway.

Listen, before I go and take my shower, can I tell you a dream I had last night about you?

Of course.

It began with Alma & I looking for you in a big city. It's a Sunday evening, getting late. She wants to be with you although it's a little awkward. We know you're dead... but you apparently have made a date. We walk into a huge construction site. Crazy angles of light and shadow from the work lamps; the ceiling dripping; ragged exposed concrete work everywhere. Some crews are working despite the late hour.

Then we spot you, you're shoveling in a heap of busted concrete with a small crew. You're in a sports jacket and slacks, but you are not playing around. You look your true age, maybe 95, and it's clear that you're already dead because your face is translucent. But here you are, *working!*

I go up to you and remonstrate half-heartedly: "*Hey, what the hell you working on a Sunday night for?*" You lean on me, more than you ever would have in life, tipping your head onto my shoulder, and admit you're pretty tired. "*But this job is all fucked up! I've got to pitch in.*" It seems you're the foreman. You tell me the plumbers have gotten everything all screwed up. "*They ran their water test and nearly every god-damned joint on the job sprang a leak!*" I look around, and it's true. Water is dribbling out of every soldered joint. "*They do it on purpose, the bastards. They're just creating all this extra work.*" The old needle about plumbers.

I have this feeling of bemused pride. My dad is in this for the Long Haul. He's going to be here a thousand years from now, pitching in... *Somebody has to do it.*

*You know what Rick? That's a pretty accurate dream...you must have scribed it.
So, now you know where to find me...maybe I can get you on in my crew someday...
So long...Good Visit!*

So long, Minkdaddy. So damned long.