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Reversals

*A Personal Account of
Victory over Dyslexia*

EILEEN SIMPSON

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*For
Marie*

Preface



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There was something wrong with my brain. What had previously been a shadowy suspicion that hovered on the edge of consciousness became certain knowledge the year I was nine and entered fourth grade. I seemed to be like other children, but I was not like them: I could not learn to read or spell. Had my present friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and I grown up together, there would have been an abyss between them and me. The books they were then reading, I did not read. Their compositions merited gold stars, won prizes; mine were unacceptable. They were at the top of their classes; I was at the bottom. Throughout my childhood and youth the nature of my disorder remained mysterious to me and those in my milieu. When I was twenty-two it was diagnosed—not by a psychologist but by a poet: I was dyslexic.

Much later, when I had become sufficiently de-

tached from the past to want to understand it, I discovered that what I had thought was a unique affliction occurs in all countries of the world, in all classes of society, and seems to have little to do with cultural, emotional, or family circumstances. Roughly one tenth of the population is dyslexic. There are those who believe that in the United States alone as many as 23 million are affected to some degree, as compared, say, with two million American stutterers.

Statesmen, public servants, generals, surgeons, writers—Woodrow Wilson, Nelson Rockefeller, General George Patton, Dr. Harvey Cushing, Gustave Flaubert, Hans Christian Andersen, and W. B. Yeats—are counted among their number.

Although the word *dyslexia* (often used loosely and inaccurately) has become fashionable today, a good deal about it remains obscure, and many of its victims continue to go unrecognized and untreated. Experts in the field have been hampered in their research because they have not been able to find out what it is like, from the inside, to live in a literate society and be unable to read and write. What has been wanting is the dyslexic's own story. As Dr. Lloyd J. Thompson has said in his book, *Reading Disabilities: Developmental Dyslexia*:

Very few anonymous reports . . . of dyslexia can be found in the literature . . . The writer has attempted many times to persuade dyslexics to write their personal experiences, but without success. It is possible that these people are still sensitive about their handicap, or that they have glossed over, forgotten or repressed the details of the traumatic experiences. Or that they still have difficulty putting their experiences into correctly

spelled words. For this reason they may be reluctant to reveal any vulnerable spot to a secretary available to do the writing for them.

The autobiographical accounts one does find are brief, and, for all the reasons suggested, anonymous or pseudonymous. Even nowadays, when the confessional mode is in style, and people talk candidly about what used to be called their private lives, the inhibition against revealing intellectual failures and limitations is strong. The old shame and fear of ridicule remain forever lively. Andersen was world famous and much decorated when he wrote:

Isn't it strange that at the age of 66 I can still suffer and feel those torments of my youth . . . ? In my dreams I am still a schoolboy and Meisling [his teacher] is rude . . .

For years now I have "passed." Were it not for the periodic threats of exposure—anyone who passes learns to live with them—I would almost have forgotten what it was like to live in the limbo of illiteracy. But in order to write this book under my own name, I had to fight the old shame and the new fear of being patronized: I suffered a relapse. My symptoms returned full-blown, providing me with a sharp reminder of what life had been like before I was "cured." There are undoubtedly details of the early years that I have forgotten: Others that remain repressed. Everything that I remember I have set down, as I remember it.

Chapter I

Having made a strenuous effort to understand the symbols he could make nothing of, he [Gustave Flaubert] wept giant tears . . .

For a long time he could not understand the elementary connection that made of two letters one syllable, of several syllables a word.

Souvenirs Intimes by Caroline
Commanville (Flaubert's niece)

The fall term was already under way when my sister and I were registered at P.S. 52, an elementary school in Inwood at the upper tip of Manhattan Island. At the principal's office we were separated. A messenger led me through a dank tunnel to one of the many annexes of the red-brick building. Constructed in 1857, it had served the community well until the recent influx of families, such as ours, who had left Chelsea and other older neighborhoods that were becoming increasingly commercial, families attracted by the greensward of natural playgrounds that surrounded Inwood valley and gave it a suburban air. The messenger led me up a flight of stairs, through a maze of corridors, and down a hall. She knocked on the door of a fourth grade classroom.

A geography lesson was in progress. An elderly spinsterish-looking woman, who had been holding a pointer to a map, took the note the messenger handed her. It was a brief account of my previous education: kindergarten through second grade at a boarding school run by nuns in Dobbs Ferry; third grade at a nonsectarian school in Farmingdale, New Jersey. While the teacher read it, I stood with my hands linked behind my back, eighty eyes focused on me. Slim and tall for my age, with copper-colored hair, I felt very much the new girl and wished I could take cover.

After assigning the class "busy work," the teacher motioned me to sit in a chair next to her desk. She handed me a paper covered with arithmetic problems and told me to go to work. Bewildered by my new surroundings, by the circuitous route I had traveled to 4A², by the size of the class, and, above all, by the curtness of the instructions, I tried to make out what I was supposed to do. Was it a test? Addition, subtraction, and multiplication problems were jum-

bled together. Subtractions were easy to recognize; they were always just two stories high. Divisions were under those little shelters. What about the others? The sign in front of this one means (didn't it?) to multiply. Yet if it was multiplication, why were there so many numbers? It must be a problem meant for a higher grade. Perhaps a mistake had been made and I was being given a test meant for my sister. She was a year older and in fifth grade. Where was Marie? Always before in school she had been in the room next to mine. How would I find her at lunch time? It would be hours before then. Hours more before we could go home.

The teacher, whose hair was arranged like an inverted bird's nest, with twiggy-looking gray hairpins sticking out this way and that, said time was up. She frowned at my paper, slashing it with giant X marks made with a red pencil. Didn't I know my multiplication tables?

I wondered at her question. Of course I knew them. What must have happened was that I'd mixed up the signs and had added where I should have multiplied. The \times and $+$ signs had a way of spinning around— $\times + \times + \times + \times + \times +$ —faster and faster, like the spokes of a bicycle wheel, so that I couldn't tell one from another. Would I now be assigned a seat and be permitted to melt into the class?

The teacher handed me a book and, indicating the place, asked me to read.

At a glance I could see that this reader was harder than the one we'd used in Farmingdale. The print was smaller and there were more words on the page. I looked over the first sentence, trying to make out what it said.

"Aloud," the teacher barked.

Aloud? Bewilderment gave way to alarm. As I

hadn't been asked to read aloud since second grade, I'd thought there would be no more oral reading. In Farmingdale the class had read in unison, or our teacher had asked for volunteers. It had never occurred to me to volunteer.

"Speak up! I haven't got all day."

The book, my hands holding it, the page looked as if I were staring down at them from a great height. The text became a gray blur, a screen on which I projected wavy lines.

By the chalky odor her clothes gave off, I could tell the teacher was leaning closer to me. I kept my eyes riveted to the page.

"What's this word?" She hit the first word with her pencil.

I flinched as if she'd hit me.

"You don't know? What's this one? This one?"

I was not looking at the words. All my attention was concentrated on my throat and teeth. Swallowing hard and clamping my jaws together as tightly as I could, I had but one thought: I must not let a room full of strangers see me cry.

"Well, we'll see about *this!*" The teacher appointed a monitor to look after the class. She marched me down the hall, down the stairs, and through the tunnel to the main building. At the principal's office, she demanded to see Mr. Snyder. Was he trying to ruin her last year before retirement? Her class was already overcrowded. There was no room for another child, especially one who didn't belong in fourth grade. This one multiplied when she was supposed to add. And as for reading . . . it was a question whether she was at second-grade level.

Mr. Snyder knew Aunt Agnes. He knew also that she was assistant to the principal at P.S. 10 in Harlem. To placate the teacher—Miss Henderson he called

her—he agreed to telephone Aunt Agnes. Could she explain the poor showing I'd made on the tests?

Aunt Agnes expressed surprise at what Mr. Snyder had to say. As we had just come to live with her she could only guess at what had happened. It was my first day in public school. I had never been in a class with more than ten children, so perhaps it was a question of shyness. It was also possible that the Farmingdale school, where we had been sent for our health, was not up to the standards of the New York City schools. In any case there was no question of my being made to repeat third grade. Only retarded children repeated in the lower grades. And, besides, I'd undoubtedly catch up quickly.

No, no question of my having to repeat, Mr. Snyder said, feeling the force of Aunt Agnes's personality through the receiver. The school could count on her to supervise my homework should it be required, could it not? That was probably all that would be necessary.

Miss Henderson was not reassured by this conversation. "All that would be necessary" indeed! Did Mr. Snyder expect her to produce miracles? On the march back to the classroom, she told me that she had a reputation as a teacher. She had never had a pupil leave her class without knowing how to read. *And she didn't intend to begin now!*

Miss Henderson lost no time in attacking what quickly became known as "the problem." The following day she called on me to take my turn during the oral reading lesson. The story, as I could make it out from the recitation of the others in my row, was about a man called Giant Whirligig. Or it was about the wind. Or both. I listened hard, trying to make sense of what I heard. When my turn came, I studied the black-and-white illustration that accompanied the text, searching

for a clue. Buried in swirly black lines was the evil-looking face of a man, his cheeks puffed out. This must be Whirligig. The puffed cheeks . . . was it the story about blowing someone's house down?

Miss Henderson, who was pacing the front of the room, said, "I'm waiting."

The words, "I'm waiting," and the ring of irritability in the voice, dislodged a memory. I was in the second grade classroom at Dobbs Ferry. It was early enough in the term for the windows to be open on a day of Indian summer, late enough for there to be a dunce—had it been Lina that day?—with a tall pointed hat standing in the corner of the room. I had been standing by the side of my desk for what seemed an eternity, a mustard-colored book, *Bible Stories for Children*, in my hand. The spine of my copy had sprung loose, exposing linen threads and blobs of glue, one of which I was worrying with my fingers. The room was quiet but for the sound of insects buzzing at the windows and the squeak of nun's shoes pacing the aisles. The class seemed to be holding its breath. Mother Cecilia broke the silence to remind me that she was "waai . . . ting."

Letting go of the glue, I made a fresh attempt to focus on the text. The initial letter of the story was bold and black. It went down steep and fast, ending in a hook, like the playground slide. I traced it with my "reading finger" and prayed for a miracle. Tears came instead. One of them made a blot on the page which the coarse paper drank into the shape of an ill-drawn star. The words broke down into smeary letters, swam toward one another, and collided.

A voice nearby prompted. Far gone in terror, I heard only a roar in my head that sounded as if I were holding a conch shell to my ear. There was the swish of a ruler. Then WHACK: The prompter had caught it.

The squeaky shoes came closer and closer. I waited, frozen, for the ear pull that would drag me to the dunce's corner. Instead the heavy hand that fell on my shoulder eased me down into my seat.

Tessa, called on in my place, covered my shame with her singsong voice. After I had stopped crying, and could listen again, I made out that it was the story about Jonah and the whale. How could the others tell what the words meant *just by looking*? And why, I wondered, my alarm increasing, had I escaped punishment? The crime of the current dunce was that she had read poorly, whereas I had not read at all. It must be that whatever was the matter with me—and surely it was something grave if all the others could make words out of the letters, and, even more remarkable, string the words together so that they told a story—it must be that whatever was the matter with me was beyond punishment. I searched for an explanation, and found one. Often when we had gone on outings to the nearby village, we had seen an ill-tempered dwarf who made rude and incomprehensible remarks as we passed by the bench where he sat. The nuns had taught us not to stare at him. We were to avert our eyes and say silently, "God bless the mark!" Mother Cecilia had averted her eyes. She must silently have said the prayer for me.

It may have seemed to her as the term progressed that He was not only blessing but helping me. If I was called on in the middle of a story, I read as well as or better than my classmates. My index finger moved across the page at the proper speed. I hesitated just the right amount of time between words. Memory (we read the stories over and over again) took me a long way. Actresslike, I studied to improve my performance. Over big words I pretended to stumble. From time to time, mimicking the other children, I appealed

to the teacher for help on a word that was "too hard." Although I could as well have looked out the window, or at the blackboard, I had to remember to keep my eyes on the book. In order to know when to turn the page, I watched my neighbors covertly.

Called on to begin a story, I was at a loss, until I learned to associate the look of the page with the title. The first page of the Wedding Feast of Cana had a mole-like imperfection in the paper, say. Or the corner of the Jonah story was dog-eared. Or the beginning of the Loaves and Fishes hung loose from the binding. How was Mother Cecilia to understand what had gone wrong when, called on to begin a story whose first page offered no secret clue, I reverted to useless tracing of letters, and to tears? Each time it happened I waited in terror, waited and waited to be dragged to the dunce's corner. And each time Mother Cecilia averted her gaze. She spared me the humiliation of the pointed hat at the price of strengthening my suspicion: In a way more hidden and mysterious, there was something as wrong with me as there was with the dwarf.

At Farmingdale there had been no dwarf, and no oral reading. Health, not school work, was the important thing. The only tests we had to pass were medical ones (Had we gained weight? Did the X rays show our lungs were stronger?). The two hours we spent in class each day went by swiftly, our lessons frequently interrupted for breathing exercises and deep knee bends. During reading period I followed along with my finger while the volunteers read. When the class read in unison, I chanted as loudly and as happily as the others. My failures in Mother Cecilia's class faded from memory. And before long I had the illusion that I read as well as my classmates.

So what apprehension I had felt the first morning I'd

set off for public school had had to do not with school work but with being a new girl in strange surroundings. If the placement tests had set off an alarm bell, it was only now, having to read aloud before the class, that I remembered the Dobbs Ferry dwarf. It was his face I superimposed on the face of Giant Whirligig.

"Has the cat got your tongue?" Miss Henderson asked. "Come up here. Come up and face the class."

My legs seemed to be beyond my control.

Miss Henderson advanced on me and pulled me to the front of the room. "Now: *Read.*"

What I had dreaded in Mother Cecilia's class, and had imagined I'd escape, had been lurking in my future. Even wearing the dunce cap would have been less mortifying than my present state. The dunce faced the wall, whereas I was made to face forty children, naked, the only cover for my shame a blush that felt like liquid fire.

A voice said, "Crying's not going to get you anywhere."

The voice said a great many other things. I didn't hear them. Blocking my ears, I kept repeating to myself, "This isn't me. I'm not here. This isn't me. I'm not here." When, finally, I was allowed to return to my seat, I put my head on the desk, folded my arms over it, and wept bitter tears.

That my mutism infuriated Miss Henderson I understood very soon. In the days that followed it became clear that she felt it was something I was doing to her. It made her feel powerless, out-of-control. She didn't know how to cope with it. "Speak up! *Speak Up!*" she'd shout, giving up all pretense of controlling her temper. "If you persist in being stubborn . . .," or "If you persist in being mulish . . .," or "If you continue

to defy me, you'll get a failure in conduct as well as in reading."

Stubborn? Mulish? These accusations surprised and wounded me. Even-tempered and submissive by nature, being good had always come easily to me. The exigent nuns at Dobbs Ferry had considered me a model of good conduct. It had made me a school favorite. The threat of a double failure, together with the habit of wishing to please, forced me to "speak up," although I knew it would get me into deeper trouble. The words I knew, I said. Others I guessed at. A letter here, a configuration there gave me a clue. Sometimes I guessed right ("Whirligig," for example, was easy to spot. It didn't look like anything else). More often, of course, I guessed wrong. Whereupon Miss Henderson would shout, "Wrong! Wrong!" Then with a "Class?" she'd invite my classmates to correct me. They did so with gusto. Their roar often frightened me (for by now I was so jumpy everything frightened me) so that I didn't catch what they said. Which meant that if the word was repeated in the next sentence, I would be stuck again. What could I do then but be silent?

Mutism, temper, humiliation, tears. Mutism, temper, humiliation, tears. So went the inescapable and inexorable round of my days.

My nights were troubled by dreams in which Miss Henderson, Whirligig, and the mocking chorus figured prominently. I awakened feeling dull and achy, as if I were coming down with the flu. I ate breakfast without appetite, dragged myself to school, and waited through the other lessons in a state of apprehension for the oral reading period. Afterward, red-eyed, sore, and spent, I waited to be released by the three o'clock bell.

Arnie Rothstein alone made life supportable. Arnie was the smartest student in the class, as one could tell by his homework notebook, which was a firmament of glittering gold and silver stars. Aside from intelligence, he also had long curly eyelashes and a scout knife which he wore, with what seemed to me incredible daring, in the outside pocket of his laced-to-the-knee boots. Having overheard at home an adult conversation about Arnold Rothstein, a gangster whose career and electrocution were periodically rehashed in the pages of the rotogravure (where he was called "the J. P. Morgan of the Underworld"), I imagined, mistakenly, that Arnie was his son. How else explain Arnie's devil-may-care attitude? In his fearless way, he took terrible chances for me. He corrected my arithmetic homework in the school yard before we filed into class. He showed me his paper during spelling tests. In oral reading it was Arnie's prompting more often than my guessing that helped me to get a word right here and there. When I was made to go to the front of the room, he could do nothing for me. After I stumbled back to my seat and had wept my heart out, I would find him looking at me, his eyes brimming over with compassion. The look in those dark eyes was like a magic balm. It eased my pain, made me feel less freakish. I was not an outcast. No matter how badly I performed, there was one person in the room who was on my side. Criminal's son or not, I fell head over heels in love with Arnie Rothstein.

Since I had said nothing at home about my daily agony in 4A², my first month's report card came as a disagreeable surprise. Not having heard from Mr. Snyder or from my teacher again, Aunt Agnes had

taken it that, my shyness overcome, I was now catching up to the public school level. Of my earlier academic difficulties, she had had no inkling. The transfer from the Dobbs Ferry School had not mentioned my erratic performance in oral reading. From Farmingdale there had been only the comment that I had satisfactorily completed the work of third grade.

Miss Henderson's report was blunt: "Failure" in reading. There was an asterisk after this grade directing the eye to a covering letter in which Miss Henderson threatened that if I did not practice reading aloud at home every evening and show *marked* improvement, there was not the slightest chance that I would be promoted at the end of the year to fifth grade.

Aunt Agnes had recently asked us to call her Auntie, to mark her role as guardian and distinguish her from our other aunts (for although we had neither parent, our mother having died when I was two months old and our father when I was five, we had a large family—a maternal grandmother, a host of aunts, uncles, great aunts and great uncles, cousins and cousins-once-removed). It was as guardian that she studied the report card, looked from it to the letter and back again in perplexity and disbelief. She took off her spectacles, which pinched the flesh of her nose, and put them into a little black box with a lid that snapped shut. Without her glasses she looked, with her high wide brow and Roman nose, like Christopher Columbus, or at least the bust of him that was in the school auditorium. Her white hair, rinsed blue by an overzealous hairdresser, was set in deep blue waves through which I sometimes imagined the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria* sailing.

Auntie congratulated Marie on her string of A's, signed her card, and dismissed her. She took up my card again and held it against her lips. She blew a hissing noise against its edge. This meant that she was dangerously vexed but uncertain what course of action to take. "Tsssssss."

It made the sound of steam about to blow the lid off a pot.

"Tsssssss." She waved the card at me. "What is the meaning of this?"

What could I say? When she pressed me, I offered the excuse that Miss Henderson's reader was "too hard."

Auntie took out her glasses and pinched them onto her nose again. "Bring it to me."

Miss Henderson's power over me was not in her tongue, though I shrank from its lashes, but in the way she used my classmates as spectators at the side show in which I was the freak. Auntie needed no outside assistance. In her person and in her manner, she was Authority. The command to bring my book to her was the moment of truth.

On the way to my room I flirted with saying I'd left my reader in school. But Auntie would find another book, one that might be even harder.

"Let me hear the lesson you've prepared for tomorrow," she said when I stood before her, my reader in hand.

With no idea how to prepare a lesson, I had this evening, as every other evening, sat looking at the book with unfocused eyes. It would not do to say this, I knew. Instead I read the lesson we had been over in class that day. Ordinarily memory would have taken me a certain way, but in Miss Henderson's class I was so apprehensive waiting for my turn to come, and so

miserable after it, that I wasn't able to listen while the others read. Reading to Auntie I found that my memory of the day's lesson ran out after the first few words.

"Continue," Auntie urged.

Clearly she was not going to prompt me or help me sound out the next word. She expected me to read until I reached a natural stopping place. So I read. That is to say I repeated my daily performance. I clutched at recognizable words, guessed at others, and invented what I thought would make a suitable connective. As I went along, and Auntie made no corrections, my spirits lifted. I had the impression that I *was* reading, just as I had had when I'd recited from memory at Dobbs Ferry, or had followed the lead of the class at Farmingdale.

A clap of thunder brought my improvisation to an end. "*What is this gibberish? I can't believe my ears. Do you hear what you're saying?*"

I didn't say so, but no, I didn't hear. I never heard what I was saying when I read. I was too busy translating what I saw on the page into what I thought everyone else saw.

"Anyone would think you were holding the book *upside down*." Auntie grabbed the book from my hand. No, I had been holding it properly. Ominously echoing Miss Henderson she asked, "What's this word?"

Now that the bubble had burst, and I understood that whatever I had been doing it could not be called reading, I knew I had no chance of success if I tried to say what a word was.

"What's this word?" Auntie pointed to another. "*How is it possible? You seem to know nothing. Do you even know the alphabet?*"

Auntie sounded scared. The terror in her voice frightened me more than anything previously had done.

"Stop crying. Now listen to me. And listen carefully. From now on you're to bring me your book every evening after dinner, do you hear?" As Auntie signed my report card, she added, "I'm going to write a note for you to take to Miss Henderson. I'll tell her that *I* will see to it that you learn to read. *And no nonsense about it.*"

Chapter II

My father was an angry and impatient teacher and flung the reading book at my head . . .

Autobiographies, by W. B. Yeats

I remember vividly the pain and mortification I felt as a boy of 8, when I was assigned to read a short passage of Scripture at a community vesper service during summer vacation in Maine—and did a thoroughly miserable job it.

Nelson Rockefeller, in *TV Guide*,
October 16, 1976

Three o'clock, when school was dismissed, was no longer a moment of liberation. After Auntie took over the role of teacher, going home was as much to be dreaded as going to school. Following a brief play period, I went to my room to prepare for the evening lesson. Or, since I had no idea how to prepare, what I did was worry. And as I worried, a going-to-the-doctor feeling grabbed hold of me, squeezing my heart and my stomach. I ate dinner listlessly. As soon as I could, I excused myself and went to my room, hoping to be forgotten. The command to appear before Auntie was not long in coming.

"The sooner we get to the lesson, the sooner it will be over" was Auntie's usual opening remark.

Reluctant to make the first mistake, I delayed as long as possible. I had difficulty finding the place. I had forgotten my handkerchief (which I was sure to have need of), and had to go back to my room to get it.

"Why are you stalling? You seem determined to try my patience."

Miss Henderson and now Auntie: There seemed to be nothing I could do to please either of them. How, in the past, had it been so easy, so effortless to be a favorite? With a feeling of impending doom I would begin. I might get halfway through the first sentence before Auntie would say in a dry, controlled voice, "In the context the word cannot possibly be 'saw.' 'The man saw going home.' Does that make sense to you? It must be 'was.'"

I'd repeat, "The man was going home." In the next sentence, or the one after, meeting the word again, I'd hesitate. Had I said 'was' before and had Auntie corrected it to 'saw,' or vice versa? My brain ached.

"Don't tell me you don't recognize that word. *I just told it to you. You're not trying.*"

Both my teachers accused me of not trying. They had no idea what an effort I was making. Was, saw, was, saw. How were they so sure which it was? Rattled by Auntie's foot tapping, I decided for "saw."

"No, no, NO. How *can* you be so stupid? The word is 'was.' WASWASWAS. And for heaven's sake *stop sniveling*. If those nuns hadn't fallen for your tears, you'd be able to read by now and we wouldn't be going through this . . ."

The burden of teaching, which Auntie had avoided in her career, preferring administrative work, made her so irascible that every evening there was a crisis. The all-too-brief interval between dinner and bedtime, during which she and Aunt Lucy (her younger sister who lived with us) had formerly read the newspaper while Marie and I had listened to the radio, had become the most painful period of the day. Aunt Lucy and Marie, unwilling auditors, hid behind closed doors and blocked their ears, struggling with resentment, one evening against Auntie for losing her temper, another evening against me for provoking her with my stupidity. It was hard to be sympathetic for long with anyone who missed easy words even a moron would know.

Aunt Lucy tried to tell Auntie what Auntie already knew but wouldn't admit, that the pedagogical role didn't suit her; she should give it up. Hadn't she noticed that I was getting worse instead of better? When I'd come to them from Farmingdale I had seemed as lively and bright as any nine-year-old. Now I behaved as though I were dull-witted. The expression on my face, even my posture, had changed. How was it that someone who was good at sports and

danced well could now be so physically awkward, always tripping over her own feet, falling so often her knees were chronically scraped? And what were those crazy words I made up which so patently had nothing to do with what was on the page and sounded like pidgin English? To say nothing of the baby talk—"nimum" for "minimum," "buff cuttons" for "cuff buttons."

Auntie said she had no intention of giving up the lessons. If she didn't take the responsibility for teaching me to read, who would?

The lessons continued, Auntie grimly determined, I increasingly despairing. She shouted, I cried, the others hid. The night I read "off" for "of" for the third time (as in, "He was off the same family as the old man"), Auntie exploded. She flew out of the chair, grabbed the book from my hand, and hurled it at my head. When it hit me, we were both astonished and shaken.

The following evening Auntie came to the lesson with a fresh resolve. She made a "saintly effort" to correct and repeat with no rise in inflection. By the time she dismissed me she looked pale and drawn, as do athletes who have overextended themselves. The strain was so great she couldn't keep it up. As time went on the lessons had less and less to do with reading. They became skirmishes in a war of nerves, each side, knowing how dangerous an engagement could be, straining for control—Auntie with her temper, I with my "idiotic errors" and ungovernable tears.

Before each lesson I told myself to go slowly. Slowly, slowly. I tried to make my eyes move in an orderly way along the line. By sub-vocalization, I studied to get the words right before pronouncing

them aloud. Above all, I admonished myself to keep calm, to fight the panic, opaque as fog, numbing as ether, which rolled in and settled on my brain.

In an effort to be more tolerant with me, Auntie began to look for a scapegoat. Miss Henderson's reader was at fault. Why was she using an old-fashioned text full of murky allegories about nature when the other fourth grade classes used a modern reader with stories more likely to interest nine-year-olds? In her elegant Palmer Method handwriting, Auntie wrote Miss Henderson. (The two teachers, who sometimes cooperated, sometimes competed, carried on a spirited correspondence, with me as letter carrier.) By return mail, Miss Henderson, whose penmanship was if anything more elegant than Auntie's, replied that she had been using the Whirligig book with great success for forty years and saw no reason to change on the eve of her retirement: It was the child who was at fault, not the book.

What, Auntie wanted to know, had my third grade teacher at Farmingdale been up to? Had that Miss Barnes taught me *nothing* all year?

While I rejoiced to hear Miss Henderson attacked, I was defensive of Miss Barnes. How I longed for those happy days of mindless chanting, the choral lessons in Miss Barnes's class. I looked back on them as an overburdened woman looks back on a carefree childhood.

By third grade even a slow child would have felt a strong desire to read—storybooks, the comics, letters from home. Had I never looked at a page of words, Auntie said, and said to myself, "I want to know what these words mean"?

The question confused me. On the one hand I had

had the impression in third grade that I *was* reading in class. On the other, there was a memory that didn't jibe with this impression. On St. Valentine's day Miss Barnes had given us crayon and paper, paste-pot and brush to make valentines with. By dinner time, when the cards were to be delivered, the excitement between the sexes (new to one who had previously been in an all girls' school) had reached fever pitch. The girls, mindful of snoopers, read their messages furtively, then looked smug or conspiratorial. The boys, reading theirs, broke into maniacal laughter.

The large envelope placed in my hand contained a white lace heart which had been pasted onto a folded sheet of red paper. Inside stood a boy, one hand on his heart, the other extended in a beseeching gesture. He was reciting a poem, as the comic strip balloon which came out of his mouth showed. What did it say? Without the chorus behind me, I found I couldn't make out the words. And I wanted to desperately. For this was not any old story like *Hans Brinker*, or the comic strips, which didn't interest me. This was a message addressed to me. I recognized some of the words—"you," "be," "my." Not enough to tell me what the poem was about. Perhaps if I concentrated very hard, as Mother Cecilia used to urge us to do, the message would come to me. Concentrating, as usual, didn't help. The picture gave me a clue. The boy was asking for something. *What could it be?* Reluctantly I slipped the card back into the envelope and assumed what I hoped was a knowing expression, in case anyone at my table was looking at me. At bedtime, when Marie and I had a moment alone, I asked her to read it to me. (She always read me the letters from home, so she didn't find this an unusual request.) As it was the first poem addressed to me, and afterward I "read" it to myself many times, I remember it exactly.

Do you?

Don't you?

Will you?

Won't you?

BE MY VALENTINE?

it pleaded. In the place where a signature should have been there was a large question mark made with India ink. Jimmy was the only one in the class who had used India ink. If the syntax of the poem was tenuous, the message was clear. Cupid's arrow made its first strike at my heart: aetat eight and a half.

Since I could no more tell Auntie about Jimmy and the valentine than I could have told her about my secret crush on Arnie, I simplified and said no, I had never felt a desire to read.

If that was the case, the nuns were to blame. They must have stifled my natural interest in reading in the lower grade. Auntie, who had a strong anticlerical streak, had never approved of the way the nuns did things. If Miss Henderson's methods were old-fashioned, the nuns' methods were medieval. Hadn't they—she became indignant all over again thinking about it—hadn't they changed my writing hand without asking my father's permission?

The summer before I entered first grade, I had looked forward impatiently to learning to write. At "The Hedges," a Victorian seaside hotel on Long Island where my father's family moved for the summer, I spent rainy days covering pages of scrap paper with arabesques I liked to think looked like letters. I would look at the marks I'd made and say to myself with a thrill of excitement, "I'm writing!" When formal lessons in penmanship began in first grade, the preference I showed for using my left hand, which heretofore no one had commented on, dis-

tressed the first grade teacher. It was as if Mother Serafina had discovered in me a moral flaw. Each time she caught me with the pencil in my "bad" hand, she put it into the "good" one. I would have made the change to please her had I not been delighted with my left-handed skill in making letters and dismayed at my right-handed squiggles. And the right way *felt* so wrong that the pencil had a way of returning to where it more comfortably rested. If I heard the teacher approaching and realized the pencil was in my left hand, I quickly transferred it. The reward for switching was a contemptuous comment, "Chicken scratch," when she picked up my paper and examined it.

A showdown came the day we were to display our newly acquired skill by writing a letter home. The brief message was written on the blackboard. We had only to copy it. The other children made practice trials in pencil and then were given writing paper and ink. The lesson was over and I was still laboring on yellow paper. After class was dismissed for the day, I was kept in. If it took all afternoon, my teacher said, she would keep me at my desk until I wrote properly. When the bell rang for supper, in desperation she gave me ink and stationery. On the first piece of paper I pressed down so awkwardly I made a hole. On the second, I made a shameful blot. In the end, with me in tears and Mother Serafina beside herself with vexation, she cupped her hand around mine and guided it over the letters.

On those rainy days at "The Hedges" when I had played at writing, I had not imagined that it would be so disagreeable to be taught the real thing. My right hand felt trapped, imprisoned in the larger, more powerful hand. I relaxed my grip on the pen, let my fingers go limp. It was Mother Serafina who wrote the letter home, not I. But the possessor of the stronger

hand also possessed the stronger will. By the end of the term I was as right-handed as all the other children. Or so it seemed.

My father had been displeased when he discovered the forced change. Auntie, who knew the practice had been abandoned some years earlier in the public schools, had been concerned that it might have done me some harm, especially as she'd noticed that I'd remained, in other ways, strongly left-sided—sighting with my left eye, listening on the phone with my left ear. Wasn't it possible, she asked now, that the change was in some way responsible for my inability to learn to read? And wouldn't you think that having been so strict about writing, the nuns would have been equally demanding about the far more important subject of reading? Marie had received excellent instruction. How was it I had been permitted to fake my way through second grade? Marie, when questioned, said that it was because I was the school favorite. Except for the letter-writing incident, I was never punished (whereas Marie, who was as rebellious as she was bright, frequently had been).

Sickly, docile, and devout: Yes, Auntie could imagine that these qualities would have made me a favorite. It was probably my physical frailty, however, that explained Mother Cecilia's willingness to ignore my inability to read. She must have decided that a child who had received extreme unction three times was not likely to live long. One winter the fever that accompanied my annual bout of pneumonia would go so high the doctor would not be able to bring it down. Therefore, I should be prepared for death, not life. I was taught a catechism well above my grade level (which I learned without difficulty), and by special dispensation I was confirmed at age six, it being thought I probably wouldn't survive to the statutory

age of eight. To the nuns' way of thinking, Auntie said with a sardonic laugh, a left-handed child would be offensive to the Almighty, an illiterate one would not.

To find a scapegoat was only momentarily gratifying. The problem remained and had to be dealt with. Auntie, who thought of herself as an amateur psychologist, made an effort to "understand" me as she tried to understand disruptive children at P.S. 10. When she wasn't angry at me, she did not believe I was mentally deficient. Illnesses apart, I had developed normally: had been trained, had walked and talked at the proper times, had got on well with other children. What, then, was the matter?

My maternal grandmother, when she heard Auntie's concern, answered unhesitatingly that there was nothing the matter with me. Why all this fuss about reading? Was Auntie trying to make a bluestocking out of me? I'd read when I was ready. Grandmother's certainty I found comforting but surprising. How could she be so sure? Did she know something Auntie didn't know? (She did, as I later discovered.)

Miss Henderson had no patience with my grandmother's indulgent attitude, and thought psychology was a euphemism for mollycoddling. She was clear in her mind that the problem was less the result of stupidity, although she thought I was certainly at best borderline, than of laziness and carelessness. It was no good my knowing that 6×6 equals 36 if on the exam I wrote 63. My right-handed penmanship, while far from pretty, was acceptable, but again I couldn't seem to copy anything from the blackboard the way it was written. My memory was of the "Swiss-cheese variety"—strong in some areas, nonexistent in others. Where it was nonexistent, it was the result of inattentiveness. It was inattentiveness that made my

spelling "completely unacceptable." In her initial alarm about my reading, Miss Henderson had overlooked my poor spelling. Now my report cards carried another "Failure."

While I have no record of how I read at that time, I do have a sample of my spelling. It is a letter written the previous year from Farmingdale. Since my spelling didn't improve for a long time, it gives an indication of the work I was handing in to Miss Henderson. Ordinarily I left it to Marie to correspond with our relatives, claiming that I never could think of "anything to say," so this letter was undoubtedly written as a class exercise. There are signs that Miss Barnes gave me considerable help with it. She probably also made suggestions about its contents. It reads:

Deare Uncel

The Dr. was hear today and examimimed us
we are booth feeling well. I hope to hear from
you soon the mail comes hear twiceaday. It is
very nirl hear. we eat well and sleep well

Your loving nice.

This naked plea for mail—originally spelled "male," erased and corrected—was considerably worked over before it was sent out. The writing is legible (although with a strong downward slant to the right-hand corner), but the paper looks messy because of the large number of erasures. Even "The" was erased and rewritten. "Dr." must have been copied from the blackboard because I knew as little about abbreviations as I knew about punctuation. "Very" was begun as "yer"; "nirl" for "nice" may have been an example of the kind of fudging I practiced for years: When in doubt I wrote letters loosely, hoping the reader would credit me with the correct spelling.

Since Miss Henderson didn't permit erasures on test papers, and the only help I received—and that furtively—was from Arnie, it is small wonder that my spelling grade in 4A² was "Failure."

The day Miss Henderson observed that I skipped whole lines as well as words when I read, she sent me home with a note suggesting that my vision be checked. Auntie and I set off for the optometrist's office in high spirits, hoping for a cure. I longed for eyeglasses. Even if they didn't help me to read better, I would look so studious wearing them that Auntie and Miss Henderson would be convinced I was "trying." The optometrist dashed our hopes: vision—20/20.

Weeks later there was another holiday. It occurred to Auntie that it was my hearing that was at fault. Why had she not thought of it immediately? As a child I had been troubled with earaches. The year I was in kindergarten my annual respiratory infection traveled to my ears. I held my head and whimpered. The day I lay down on the kindergarten floor and complained that my head was going to burst, the doctor was called. He wrapped me in a sheet, mummylike, and incised the eardrum. My temperature rose. My father, who had been summoned, was displeased with the way things were going. He hurried me from Dobbs Ferry to New York in an ambulance for a consultation with a specialist. After the examination, Dr. Gormley looked grave. He would have to perform a radical mastoidectomy on the right ear immediately. When I had recuperated, he would operate on the left ear, which was also infected. There was a very good chance, he warned, that I would be deaf.

At first my recovery was said to be miraculous. The left ear would not have to be operated on after all. The incision behind the right one was healing nicely. And, most astonishing of all, I had suffered no hearing loss.

Clearly I wasn't completely deaf. But perhaps there had been just sufficient hearing loss to explain why I would be told a word ten times and the following evening get it wrong again. Hopes high again, we set off to see an otologist. No luck with him either: My hearing was excellent.

There followed a longish, muted period during which Auntie was neither angry nor making an effort to control herself. She seemed patient in a new, preoccupied way. One night, overhearing the grown-ups talk, I understood why. Dr. Gormley again. Hadn't he told my father that he'd had to cut into my skull during the surgery? A slip of the chisel was all that would have been needed . . .

Had my brain been damaged? If further evidence was needed to confirm Auntie's suspicion, she had it the day she sent me on an errand to a new grocery store four blocks from home. I was so long in returning she demanded an explanation: Where had I been?

I had been lost.

Lost? How could I have been when the store was on Academy Street, the street we lived on? Was I sure I hadn't met a friend and dallied to play?

What had happened, as I tried to explain—not very clearly because I didn't understand it myself—was that coming out of the store I turned left instead of right. I walked four blocks in the wrong direction, saw that it was wrong, returned to the store, set out in the proper direction, looked for our building, number 341, in a row of identical apartment houses. Not finding it, I returned to the store, tried the other direction again. Back and forth I went, becoming more and more confused, then panicky. It seemed impossible that I could be so close to home and yet not be able to find my way. I saw it as another sign of my stupidity. By chance Ginny, the high school girl who lived in the

apartment above ours, came along. I asked, as casually as I could, if she was going home and joined her. She talked animatedly about the prom they were preparing for at high school. Ordinarily I would have been greedy for the details. I thought high school an exciting place to be, because of Ginny's accounts of what went on there, and thought Ginny's life unimaginably glamorous. Instead of listening this time, I tried to think how I would explain my long absence to Auntie.

When we reached the house, I saw that I had passed it repeatedly in my search. I knew the number well enough, but had looked for 431 instead of 341. My incoherent explanation troubled rather than angered Auntie, especially as it reminded her that Miss Henderson had reported more than once that if I was sent on an errand to the main building at P.S. 52, I invariably lost my way back to the annex. Was a nine-year-old girl who had no sense of direction "all there"?

The old family doctor, the one my father had consulted whenever there had been a medical crisis at Dobbs Ferry, still practiced in Chelsea, around the corner from what had been my grandfather's house. Auntie decided to take me to see him. Dr. Hess knew my history and had Dr. Gormley's report of the ear surgery. The doctor received us in his parlor-floor consultation room. He flashed a bright light into my eyes, looked into my ears, hit my knees with a hammer, scraped down the sole of my feet with a metal instrument. He listened to my lungs, ran his fingers down my spine, weighed me. I had lost some of the weight I had gained at Farmingdale and showed signs of developing a slight curvature of the spine that should be watched. Otherwise I was fine. What was the problem?

Auntie gave him an expurgated version of what had been happening in the past few months—my failure in school, her attempts to teach me. Could the mastoidectomy . . . ? Was there something the matter with the b-r-a-i-n? She spelled the word, thinking I was as poor at guessing as I was at spelling.

Dr. Hess made light of her concern. What impressed him was how well I was doing, not how poorly. Was she forgetting what a sickly child I'd been? More than once he'd thought I was a goner. Why worry about a little trouble in school? I'd outgrow it, probably. A slow-developer. Maybe even a nonreader. That was all. Not surprising when you remembered the sky-high fevers and . . .

On the long subway ride home Auntie whistled her dry whistle. Tsssssssss. At P.S. 10, her school, "slow-developer" was a euphemism for retardation. There were special classes, "ungraded" classes, for such children. She was angry with Dr. Hess for suggesting that I was one of them (even though the thought had crossed her mind more than once) and was irritated with him for speaking as he had in front of me. It was all very well for him to talk about patience, she said aloud, but if I didn't learn to read now, it would ruin my *whole life*. Before I knew it, I'd be put in a special class. If I got into high school, which seemed unlikely at the rate I was going, I would be "shunted" into the commercial course.

Nothing Auntie had previously threatened, and she threatened everything she could think of, had so chilled my blood. My high school days ruined, too? The glimpses I had had of George Washington High School, Ginny's high school, the splendid edifice on top of Fort George whose gleaming cupola I looked up at from Inwood, had stimulated fantasies of happier days to come. Elementary school, with its emphasis

on reading, spelling, and arithmetic, was a dreary stretch to be struggled through so that one would be free to go to high school. Ginny had assured me that Latin and geometry were not only more interesting but easier than subjects we studied at P.S. 52. Dreaming of an escape from the miseries of childhood and elementary school, I had seen myself, like her, wearing high-heeled shoes and a black crew-neck sweater with a giant orange W on it. Like her, I would be on the basketball team, and after school, I would walk down the hill, a boy at each elbow, talking excitedly about the coming prom. The gymnasium would be transformed with balloons and crepe paper into an ocean liner. The band would play "Avalon." In a white evening gown, I would glide around the floor in Arnie's arms, while those on the stag line waited impatiently to cut in. High school, a delightful way station on the express train to adulthood, was now endangered by my inability to read. I might not get there at all. Or if I did, I'd have to take the commercial course. I didn't know what that was, but it sounded punitive, a threat to my dreams.

Dr. Hess had unwittingly given Auntie a tonic. That evening she took up the lessons again with renewed vigor. Before beginning she made me a little speech. Children in ungraded classes were unfortunates who came from poor backgrounds and had inherited their defects. I came from a family of educators. Of *readers*. My paternal grandfather, who had been appointed by Mayor Grace as an honorary member of the New York City Board of Education, had taught his children to read. They had all learned *before* going to school. She, as I knew, was an omnivorous reader. So, too, had my father been. What would *he* have thought of my report cards?

I often wondered. When I should have been

preparing my lesson, I found myself daydreaming about what life would have been like had my father, my indulgent father, not died when he was only thirty. He would not have scolded me, nor said I was stupid. He would have known what was wrong with me. Or, if he hadn't, he would have found a doctor to cure me the way he had done when I had had those terrible earaches.

After a visit to my maternal grandmother, or to the great aunt and uncle with whom Marie and I spent Christmas and Easter vacations, I daydreamed that my father had named one of them guardian in his will. Grandmother, a tall, elegant woman who wore pearl earrings, a chin veil, and furs over her arms, thought girls should be dressed prettily and prepared for marriage. What was Auntie making all the fuss about? What was the hurry about my learning to read? I'd learn sooner or later.

Great uncle Charlie, who exaggerated my talent for music, thought I should be given a musical education. It was a source of astonishment to me, and a great comfort, that my mother's side of the family refused to believe anything was wrong with my brain. I say that it was comforting, but it was so only when I was with them. Back at school, or at home again, the evidence was too strong that there *was* something wrong. Still, it was a lifeline that I grabbed hold of when I thought I was drowning. And day-to-day it furnished material for daydreams: Wearing a blue velvet party dress Grandmother had bought me, I was singing "Drink to me only with thine eyes" to an admiring circle of relatives (who didn't know I couldn't read the words but had memorized them), while Uncle Charlie, glowing with pride, accompanied me at the piano.

"If you spent less time daydreaming and more time concentrating on your book," Auntie would say, catching me at it, "you'd be able to read by now."

If Auntie was tempted to abandon the lessons, my midterm report card, which carried renewed threats, spurred her on. She drove herself, and me, harder than ever: I would not be, could not be, left back.

How could I not be, I wondered, when every day even I had evidence that I didn't belong in fourth, much less fifth grade. When we were asked to fold our papers down from the top, I folded mine up from the

bottom. (No, Arnie's eyes signaled: this way.) Asked to raise my right hand, I raised my left. Even assembly, one of the periods in the day I enjoyed because of the singing and marching, would have been spoiled if I'd listened to the left/right directions instead of going toward the piano (left), or toward the windows (right). Except for the gym class, which I also enjoyed and where in games we played I was surprisingly well-coordinated, my body seemed out of control. The curvature in my spine, which Dr. Hess

had noted, became more obvious as my back seemed too heavy a burden for me to hold up. I was always tired. My legs buckled under me. I fell constantly, tripping my stockings and scraping my knees. I walked into objects as if they weren't there. The cord I pulled to turn on a light came off in my hand. When I prepared vegetables, I cut my finger. When I dried dishes, the breakage was high. I lost school books, lunch box, mittens, hats, and once, in the dead of winter, my coat.

Evening lessons were now a matter of routine despair. Having tried harder than ever when I heard my high school days were in jeopardy, without the least sign of success, I felt overwhelmed with impotence. The massive boulder under which I was pinned would not budge. I gave up struggling.

"You're not trying," Auntie shouted, terrified by my slackness. "I'm doing this for your own good. Can't you understand?"

Sometimes I tried to understand. I put myself in Auntie's place. This woman was not my mother. She didn't have to struggle to teach me to read. She could allow me to be put in the ungraded class. Why should she care? I imagined what it was like for her to come home from a bad day at school (a knife fight in the lunchroom, say, police, ambulances, a student rushed to the hospital, a hysterical mother to be calmed down: everyday occurrences at P.S. 10). Warily, she called me for the lesson. I began to read in the usual halting, stumbling, maddening way. Her fatigue, frustration, concern about my future became almost palpable to me. In sympathy with her, I made up a new fantasy. I pictured, as vividly as I could, the strain of her work day, the reluctance with which she began the lesson. The reading went as usual until, because I tried extra, extra hard, it happened! The words began to spill out of my mouth as if Auntie herself were reading. My recitation was letter-perfect, I read "with expression" and, the ultimate test, with comprehension. So went the fantasy.

Empathy proved a dangerous strain. If I was on Auntie's side, I must be against mine. My low view of myself would drop lower. I would have to agree with Auntie that I was lazy and had a "loose moral fiber." But Auntie after all was Auntie and I, however gelatinously, was I. If I didn't hold tight to what there was of me, I might turn to liquid, like my tears, and evaporate.

Aunt Lucy suggested that I be tutored by Marie. Auntie wouldn't hear of it. That would increase my already excessive dependence on Marie. But wait . . . how about cousin Tom? My junior by six months, he would sharply point up my backwardness, and might even engender a spirit of competition.

This further indignity I had to tolerate only briefly.

Tom's method was to mimic Auntie's. After he'd run through her catalogue of reproaches and invectives and couldn't think what next to do, we sat, he and I, in sticky silence. Discovering that to be a jailer can be almost as tedious and disagreeable as to be a prisoner, he soon asked to be released.

If during that year it occurred to me to be defiant, to shout back, to refuse to do the lesson, to storm out of the house, I must quickly have rejected the idea. Rebelliousness was the prerogative of bright children, I thought, like my sister.

Nor did I permit myself to give a name to the feelings of anger and rage I felt toward Auntie and Miss Henderson. To hate a human being, I had been taught, was a mortal sin. Fortunately the commandments left me a way out. They said nothing about hating objects. So I was free to hate books as much as I liked. And I hated them mightily. They were as repellent as snakes. And as disagreeable to handle. I avoided touching them whenever possible.

"Where is your reader?" Auntie would say, when she came home in the late afternoon and found me staring off into space. With a gesture of helplessness, I'd said I couldn't find it. An hour or so later, after the apartment had been combed and the reader found, I'd hear her complain to Aunt Lucy: "Can you believe it? This time I found it in the broom closet. Isn't she the limit? When she doesn't drop it, she misplaces or hides it. Do you think she does it on purpose?" To me she'd say, "Why did you hide it?"

"I didn't hide it," I'd claim, astonished that she imagined me capable of an action so spunky. "It just got there."

Lacking the courage for open rebellion, I turned to petty delinquency. Nothing had convinced me that the

candy we had at home, which came in boxes and was doled out for good behavior, could compare with the penny candy the other children bought after school. If I ate a dry lunch, I could use the nickel Auntie gave me to buy milk with for penny candy. Old Mr. Samuelson, who owned the candy store, waited patiently behind the display case while my classmates and I agonized over our choices. There were green leaves, chicken feet, ropes of licorice, peppermint sticks, Mary Janes, bubble gum and the superior and more expensive double bubble gum, Tootsie Rolls, jujubes, chocolate cigarettes, and jelly beans of all colors, the red ones much in demand among those who dared to pretend to wear lipstick.

The day Auntie, going through my jumper before putting it into the laundry, came upon an unwrapped green leaf with a large bite out of it, my visits to the candy store came to an abrupt end. Not taken in by the lie I made up to explain where I'd got the candy, Auntie was convinced that I'd stolen money from a classmate. If I wouldn't tell her from whom, she'd take the matter to Miss Henderson, expose me to the whole class, to the principal if necessary. When I confessed about the milk money, I was not only lectured on the importance of milk and the danger of sweets to the growing body, with a vividly painted picture of what it would be like to be a toothless and brittle-boned adult, but was warned that if I didn't buy milk each day, the lunchroom teacher would call her at P.S. 10 and report it.

Until now it had never occurred to me to steal. The next time I was sent to the store to buy bread, my eyes lit on the open canister of chocolate-covered graham crackers that was on the counter. Summoning my courage, I asked what they cost. Two for a penny. I said I'd take two. On the way home I wolfed down the

cookies. Putting the bread on the kitchen table and the change beside it, I went to my room to wait for trouble. None came that day, nor the next. When it did, and it didn't take long, the message that came through to me clearly was that for the dull-witted crime did not pay.

Had Auntie been less attentive, or I less timid, I might have gone on to more serious delinquency. But as a thief I showed little talent, and my lies, as Auntie derisively pointed out, were transparent and illuminated by guilty blushes. Thereafter I didn't go straight, but neither did I go on to bigger things. When a new teacher came to the lunchroom, I rationalized that instead of milk I could substitute a Milky Way. I ate the candy bar on the spot, so there would be no evidence such as there had been with the green leaf.

In the end a simple-minded form of protest turned out to be surprisingly effective. I stopped bathing. Stopped completely. When I should have been in the tub scrubbing myself, I sat on a bath stool in a fog of steam, wool-gathering. A fake splash or two, a resounding slosh, a dampened towel, and a crumpled bathmat were all that was needed to convince anyone, so I thought, that I had taken a bath. Had I been a boy no one would have been alarmed. Boys are allowed an unwashed period: Boys will be boys. But a dirty girl? Wasn't this a sign of *pathology*? wondered Auntie, who found me out before long.

I had begun the year as a nonreader who thought there was something wrong with her brain. The "something" felt, when I was calm enough to analyze it, like a mechanical failure: a switchboard with lines that had become scrambled. In moments of panic—during oral reading lessons—the mechanism broke down completely: Messages were neither sent nor delivered. By the end of the school year, the

"something" had become so general that I was convinced I was defective both intellectually and morally. I was stupid. I was lazy. I was a liar. I was a petty thief. I was an awkward, accident-prone, slovenly, stooped, stuttering, dirty, crybaby.

Abruptly the evening lessons were canceled. The cause and nature of my backwardness were no longer discussed openly. (Indeed, it became an unmentionable.) At school the heat was off.

Was it, as I liked to think, if the word *think* can be used to describe a process so little conscious and articulated, that by not bathing I had shown Auntie and Miss Henderson that they had pushed me too far? Without comment, and for no reason that I could see other than that I was the tallest girl in the class, I was promoted—a "social" promotion it was called—to fifth grade.

From hell I was moving into a limbo of illiteracy.

Chapter III

When testing dyslexics as to their power of silent or oral reading, it is not infrequently found that the child performs no worse—sometimes even a little better—if the book is held upside down.

The Dyslexic Child,
by Macdonald Critchley