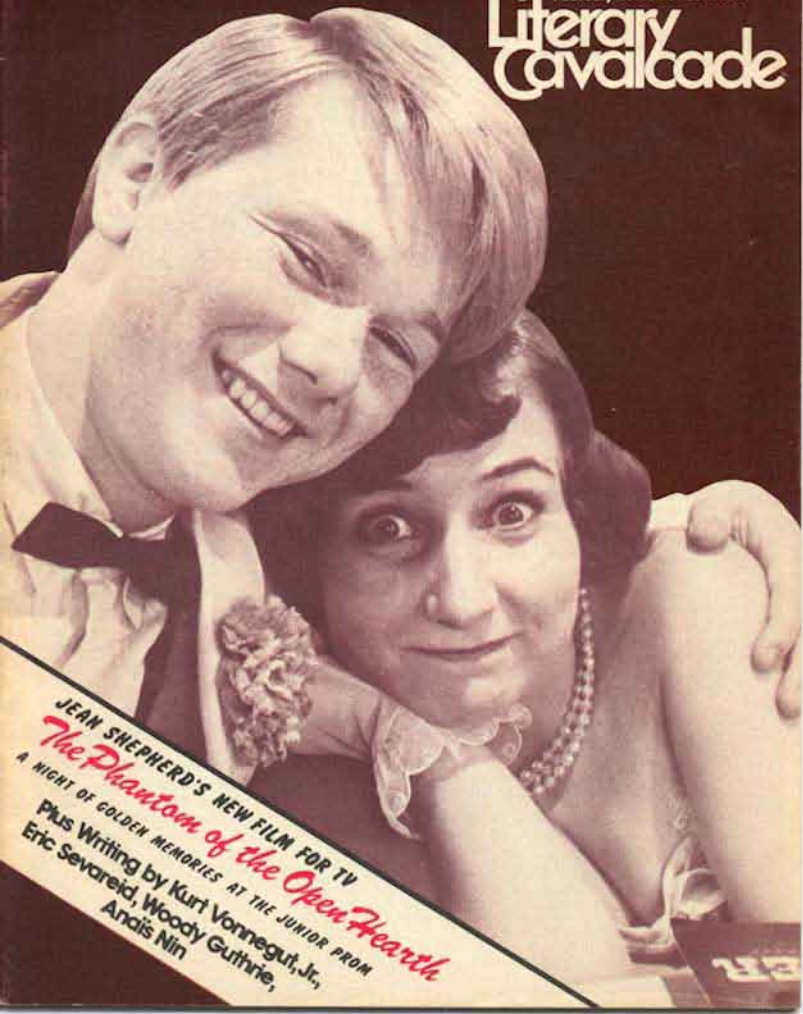


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Literary Cavalcade



JEAN SHEPHERD'S NEW FILM FOR TV

The Phantom of the Open Hearth

A NIGHT OF GOLDEN MEMORIES AT THE JUNIOR PROM

Plus Writing by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.,
Eric Sevareid, Woody Guthrie,
Anais Nin



by JEAN SHEPHERD

• *The Phantom of the Open Hearth* is adapted from a film for TV by Jean Shepherd. It was broadcast on *Visions*, a weekly series of original television dramas produced under the artistic direction of Barbara Schultz, KCET, Los Angeles, and presented on the Public Broadcasting Service. A paperback version of *The Phantom of the Open Hearth* will be available from Doubleday in the fall of 1977. Used by permission of the author. All rights reserved.

Photos by Don Seach and Janet Oliver



(RALPH walks through his town, Hohman, Indiana, past the Tavern, the playgrounds, the Warren G. Harding High School, the local movie house, the alleys and the backyards of this steel mill town in the Midwest.)

Narrator: It all began here, in that great inverted bowl of darkness, the Midwest. Ours was not a genteel neighborhood, by any stretch of the imagination. Nested picturesquely between the looming steel mills and the verminously aromatic oil refineries and encircled by a colorful conglomerate of city dumps and fetid rivers, our northern Indiana town was and is the very essence of the Midwestern industrial heartland of the nation. There was a standard barbershop bit of humor that said it with surprising poeticism: If Chicago (only a stone's throw away across the polluted lake waters) was Carl Sandburg's "City of the Broad Shoulders," then Hohman had to be that city's broad rear end. . . . It's America: thousands of little kids growin' up . . . just beginning to walk along the yellow brick road of life, walking hand in hand with Judy Garland to that vast emerald city of eternal popularity, success, all wonderful things, paradise. The only thing you have to do is to steer clear of poppy fields, don't listen to too many cowardly lions, and, by George, you're gonna make it. (RALPH is joined by WANDA HICKEY, a pleasant but plain girl, who emerges from a corner grocery store carrying a bundle. RALPH tries to ignore her.)

Wanda: Hi, Ralph.

Ralph: Oh, hi, Wanda.

Wanda: Did you have to work today?

Ralph: Ya; just half a day on Saturday.

Wanda: Want a jaw breaker?

Ralph: Thanks.

(Both put giant jawbreakers into their mouths, and walk along together, chewing. At the end of the NARRATOR's speech, they head off in different directions.)

Narrator: Wanda Hickey was the only girl who I knew for absolute fact liked me. Ever since we had been in third grade, Wanda had been hanging around the outskirts of my social circle. She laughed at my jokes and once, when we were 12, actually sent me a valentine. She was always loitering around the tennis courts, the ball diamonds, the alleys where on long summer nights we played kick-the-can or siphoned gas to keep Flick's Chevy running. In fact, there were times when I couldn't shake her.



Wanda: See ya.

(We are in a greasy spoon which caters to the high school crowd. RALPH joins his friends.)

Schwartz: (mouth full of french fries): I bet you couldn't guess what I'm gettin' for graduation.

Ralph: (slipping into daydream): Hmmm?

Flick: (hollering over general hullabaloo and 400 watts of jukebox): This ketchup is rotten. It's all clotted on the bottom. (Top of his lungs.) Hey, John, how about some fresh ketchup here? This bottle's been on the table for six years!

Schwartz: You wouldn't believe what I'm gettin' for graduation.

Flick: (standing up, waving ketchup bottle): Hey, John, ketchup over here for the troops!

(JOHN, a short swarthy man of evil temper due to a life of continual harassment by acne-plagued adolescence and a succession of short-order cooks who quit every three days, walks to their booth.)

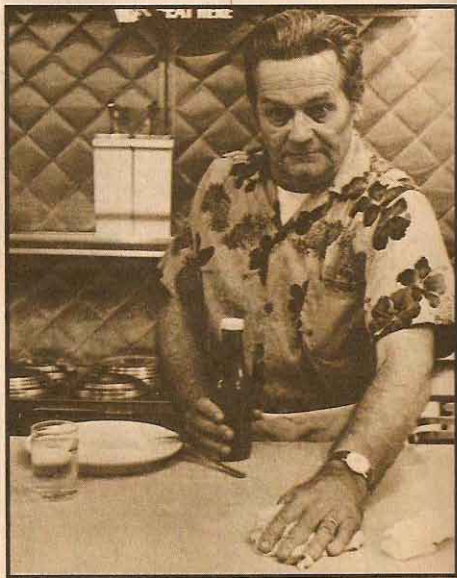
John: Who the hell's hollerin' for ketchup?

Flick: Me. Over here.

(Ketchup in bottle, still being waved, suddenly unclots, spraying surrounding customers, including renowned defensive halfback, who rises menacingly and settles back, figuring that it isn't worth it.)

Halfback: Watch it, punk.

John: I don't have ten arms, kid. Here's your mustard.



Flick: I wanted ketchup.

John: Oh, why don't you make up your mind!

(JOHN disappears into smoky-blue kitchen.)

Schwartz: Yep, it's gonna be some graduation.

Ralph *(coming out of a daydream):* Hmmm?

(FLICK, resigned to his fate, scoops mustard out of the bottle with a finger and smears it on his cheeseburger.)

John *(reappearing):* Who wanted the ketchup here?

Halfback: Hey, Shrimp, you wanted the ketchup, right? *(He grabs ketchup from JOHN, pours half on FLICK's cheeseburger.)* That enough? Or wouldja like a little on top of your head?

Ralph: Pass the ketchup, please.

Halfback: You trying to get smart, kid?

Schwartz: I think my old man's getting me a power saw.

Halfback *(shoving ketchup bottle at RALPH):* Just watch it, kid.

Schwartz: Yessir, I'm gonna mount it on my workbench.

John: Which one o' you gets the coffee malt?

Flick: Here.

John: You two guys get the Cokes, right?

Ralph and Schwartz: Yeah.

(Brief period of gulping.)

Schwartz: You going to the Prom?

Ralph: Yep, I guess so.

Flick: Who ya takin'?

Ralph: I don't know. I was thinking of Daphne Bigelow.

Narrator: I had dropped the name of the most spectacular girl in the entire high school, if not the state of Indiana itself.

Schwartz: No kidding!

Ralph: Yeh. I figure I'd give her a break.

(FLICK snorts, the gassy soda pop going down the wrong pipe. He coughs and wheezes for several moments. Dissolve to a long shot down the school corridor. A very attractive girl walks towards the camera. Dissolve to other shots of her in glamorous adolescent activities—sunbathing on beach, riding in a convertible, etc.)

Narrator: Why does a man become a revolutionary? Just when is that precise instant of stark realization when he perceives with unmistakable clarity that he is but a humble tenpin in the cosmic bowling game of life? And that others are balls in that game? Look closely into the early private life of any great revolutionary and you will find a girl. Somewhere along the

line, a pair of elfin eyes put Karl Marx down so decisively that he went home and wrote the first words of his *Manifesto*. I well remember my own turning point. Like most pivotal moments in our lives, it came unexpectedly and in the guise of rare good fortune. Her name was Daphne Bigelow. Even now, I cannot suppress a fugitive shiver of tremulous passion and dark yearning: There was something about her, something I am not quite sure I can adequately convey through the sadly lacking means of imperfect human language. Daphne walked in a kind of soft haze of approaching dawn. A suggestion always lingered about her that she wasn't there at all. Rosy gold and blue tints flushed and were gone; soft winds blew. Somewhere exotic birds called out in their sleep as Daphne drifted into Biology 1, trailing mimo-

(Cut back to "John's place.")

Schwartz: Ya gotta go formal. I read on the bulletin board where it said you wear a summer formal to the Prom.

Flick: No kidding? What's a summer formal?

Ralph: That's where you wear one of those white coats. Ya gotta rent 'em.

Halfback: Did you say Bigelow, Kid?

Ralph: Yeah.

Halfback: That's what I thought you said.

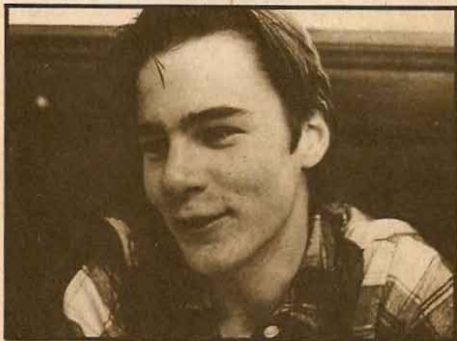
(HALFBACK takes a huge swig of root beer, burps menacingly, hitches up his pants, and swaggers out.)

Schwartz: What was that all about?

Ralph: Search me.

Flick: You never can figure what them jocks are thinking. If anything.

Narrator: You know, it's a funny thing about being an American. I don't think anybody else in the world un-



sa blossoms and offering ecstasies not yet plumbed by human experience. Way down deep among the lower one-third of the class, amid that great rabble of faceless mankind who squat among the rancid lunch bags and musky galoshes of academe, who are forever condemned to view the great pageants of life from parked third-hand jalopies amid the apple cores and beer cans of drive-in movies, I sat, hardly daring to hope—from over a gulf so vast as to make all earthly distances pale to triviality—and devoured her daily with my eyes from behind a Biology I work-

derstands how it is to be an American...and I'm not so sure that we understand it either. The American is the only person in the world who really believes that the past used to be tremendous, the future's gonna be fantastic; it's only now that's rotten.

(Closeup of invitation card on shelf in bathroom, where RALPH is finishing washing his hands: "The Junior Class is proud to invite you to the Junior Prom, to be held at the Cherrywood Country Club beginning eight p.m., June fifth. Dance to the music of Mickey Evisley and his Magic Music Makers. Summer formal required. The Committee.")

Mother (from downstairs we hear her voice): Come on, breakfast's ready. (RALPH joins his FATHER at the table.)

Dad: Who ya gonna take to the Prom?

Ralph: Oh, I don't know. I was thinking of a couple of girls.

Mother: Why not take that nice Wanda Hickey?

Ralph: Aw, come on, Ma. This is the Prom. This is important. You don't take Wanda Hickey to the Prom. I haven't decided who I'm gonna take. I was kind of thinking of Daphne Bigelow.

Dad: You're a real glutton for punishment, ain't you? Oh well, you might as well learn your lesson once and for all. Yep. Too many guys settle for the first skirt that shows up. And regret it the rest of their lives.

(Ignoring the innuendo, MOTHER sets the lumpy oatmeal down on the table.)

Mother: Well, I think Wanda is a very nice girl. But then, what I think doesn't matter.

Ralph: I gotta rent a summer formal.

Dad: You're gonna wear one a' them monkey suits?

Ralph: I'm going down to that place on Hohman Avenue tomorrow with Schwartz and see about it.

Randy: Oh, boy! Lah-di-dah.

Narrator: A characteristically eloquent understatement. Like father, like son.

(Shots of RALPH and FLICK walking to school. Other kids arrive by bus. They head into school and RALPH catches a glance of DAPHNE BIGELOW.)

Narrator: Puberty rites in the more primitive tribal societies are almost invariably painful and traumatic experiences. And step by step, in the ancient tradition, the tribal ritual was being acted out at the High School.

(RALPH tries to work up courage to ask DAPHNE to the Prom. He trails her to her locker, and walks up to her as the final bell rings.)

Narrator: The Prom, which was now two weeks off, began to occupy our minds most of the waking day. The semester had just about played itself out; our Junior year was almost over. The trees and flowers were in blossom, great white clouds drifted across deep-blue skies and baseball practice was in full swing—but somehow, this spring was different from the rest. The Prom was something that we had heard about since our earliest days. A kind of golden aura hung over the word itself. There was only one thing wrong. As each day ticked inex-



orably by toward that magic night at the Cherrywood Country Club. I still could not steel myself to actually seek out Daphne Bigelow and ask her the fatal question. Time and again, I spotted her in the halls, drifting by on gossamer wings, her radiant complexion casting a glow on all those around her, her brilliant smile lighting up the corners of 202 homeroom. But each time, I broke into a fevered sweat and chickened out at the last instant. (DAPHNE rushes off to class and RALPH is left again without having had a chance to ask her to the Prom. As he turns around, he sees WANDA HICKEY.)

Wanda: Hi.

(RALPH, in the classroom, stares at DAPHNE.)

Narrator: Another day had faded forever into history. As my intricately contrived glandular system ripened and matured, so my carefully concealed passion for Daphne Bigelow burgeoned, until finally it engulfed me and I was swallowed up like Jonah into the inky blackness of the whale's belly.

(RALPH is joined by SCHWARTZ. They walk down the road to Ralph's house.)

Schwartz: How ya doin' with Daphne Bigelow?

Ralph: Oh, that. I haven't had time to ask her.

Schwartz: Ya better get on the stick.

Ralph: Who you got lined up?

Schwartz: Clara Mae Mattingly. Yep.

Ralph: Boy, she sure can spell.

Narrator: It was all I could think of to say that was good about her, other than that she was female.

Schwartz: Sure can.

Ralph: You gonna send her a corsage?

Schwartz: Already ordered it. At the Cupid Florist.

Ralph: An orchid?

Schwartz: Yep. Cost eight bucks. That includes a gold pin for it.

(Camera pulls back from an extreme closeup of a face to reveal it is part of a sign hanging out over the street. It is the cutout of a tall, creamfaced man dressed in high silk hat, starched shirt, swallowtailed coat, striped trousers, and an ivory-headed walking stick held with an easy grace by his dove-gray gloved hand. Beneath, in red, sputtering neon script,

are the words: "AL'S SWANK FORMAL-WEAR. RENTED BY THE DAY OR HOUR. FREE FITTINGS." RALPH and SCHWARTZ pass under the sign, enter the doorway, and climb the narrow, dark, wooden steps to the second floor. Within a red arrow painted on the wall are the words: "SWANK FORMAL—TURN LEFT." They pass a couple of dentists' offices and a door marked: "BAIL BONDSMAN—FREEDOM FOR YOU DAY OR NIGHT.")

Schwartz: I wonder if Fred Astaire ever comes here?

Ralph: Oh, come on, Schwartz. This is serious!

(RALPH and SCHWARTZ enter a small room with a yellow light bulb hanging from the ceiling, a couple of tall glass cases containing suits on hangers, a counter, and a couple of smudgy, full-length mirrors. A swarthy, bald, hawk-eyed, shirt-sleeved man is standing behind the counter. Around his neck hangs a yellow measuring tape. He wears a worn vest with a half-dozen chalk pencils sticking out of the pocket.)

Schwartz: Uh... we'd like to...

Al: OK, boys, ya wanna make it big at the Prom, am I right? Ya come to the right place. Ya goin' to the hop out at Cherrywood, right?

Ralph: Uh... yeah.

Al: And ya wanna summah fawmal, right? (Shouting.) Hey, Morty! Here's two more for that bash at Cherrywood. I'd say one thirty-six shawt, one fawty regulah.

Morty (from the bowels of the establishment): Comin' up! (Humming to himself, AL begins to pile boxes as if SCHWARTZ and RALPH are not even there. SCHWARTZ is busily inspecting a collection of bow ties displayed under glass in one of the showcases. MORTY shouts from the back room.) OK on the thirty-six shawt, Al, but I'm outa fawties. How 'bout that fawty-two regulah that just came back from that wedding?

Al: Cut the talk an' bring the goods!

Morty: The fawty-two ain't been cleaned yet!

Al: Bring it out, awready! This suit just come in from another job. Don't worry about how it looks. We'll clean it up an' take it in so's it'll fit good. (MORTY emerges, a tall, thin, sad man in a gray smock, even balder than AL. He carries two suits on hangers, drapes them over the counter, gives AL a dirty look, and stalks back into the shadows.) OK now, boys. (To SCHWARTZ.) First

you. Take this and try it on behind the curtain. It should fit good. It's maybe a little long at the cuffs, but we'll take them up. (SCHWARTZ grabs the hanger and scurries behind the green curtain. AL holds up the other suit. In the middle of a dark reddish-brown stain that covers the entire right breast pocket is a neat little hole right through the jacket. AL turns the hanger around and sticks his finger through the hole.) Hey Morty!

Morty: What now?

AL: How 'bout this little innu-fawty-two? Can ya fix it?

Morty: Waddaya want, miracles?

AL: Don't worry, kid. We can fix this up good as new. You'll never tell it ain't a new coat. (SCHWARTZ emerges from the fitting room shrouded in what looks like a parachute with sleeves. AL measures him quickly and roughly.) Perfect! Couldn't be bettuh! It's made for you. Just perfect. Couldn't be bettuh. Perfect. Like tailormade. OK, kid, take it off. I'll have it ready for you next week. (SCHWARTZ disappears into the fitting room.) Here, slip on this coat. (RALPH puts on the jacket. AL spins him around.) Just perfect. Couldn't be bettuh. Fits like a glove. Take it in a little here; pull in the bias here... (He takes out his chalk and makes a few marks on RALPH's back.) OK, slip outa it. And don't worry 'bout the stain; we'll get it out. Musta been some party. Here, try on these pants. (He tosses a pair of midnight-blue trousers to RALPH, who catches them and disappears into the changing cubicle.)

Narrator: Inside the hot little cubicle, as I changed into the pants, I stroked the broad black-velvet stripe that lined the outer seam. I was really in big time now. They were rumpled, of course, and they smelled strongly of some spilled beverage, but they were truly magnificent. The waist came to just a shade below my armpits, beautifully pleated. Tossing the curtain aside, I shashayed out like Cary Grant.

AL: Stand up straight, kid. (AL leans close to RALPH and speaks in his ear.)

Narrator: An aromatic blast of pas-trami and pickled herring made my head reel.

AL: Ah. Perfect. Just right. Put a little tuck in the waist. So. And a little in here.

Narrator: A sudden thrill of pain as he violently measured the inseam. Then it was all over.

AL: Now, how do ya see the shirts? You want 'em straight or ruffled? Or pleated, maybe? Very smart. I would recommend our Monte Carlo model, a real spiffy numbah.

Schwartz: Boy, now that's a shirt!

Ralph: That's what I want.

Schwartz: Me, too.

AL: OK now, how 'bout studs? Ya got 'em?

Ralph: Uh... what?

AL: OK, I guess not. I'll throw 'em in. Because you're high-class customers. Now, I suppose ya wanna go first-class, right?—Right?

Schwartz (uncertain): Yeah!

AL: I knew that the minute you two walked in. Now, I'm gonna show you somepin that is exclusive with AL's Swank Formalwear. (With an air of mystery, he bends over, slides open a drawer, and places an object on the counter.) No place else in town can supply you with a genuine Hollywood paisley cummbund. It's our trademark. (RALPH and SCHWARTZ examine it.) It's only a buck extra. And worth five times the price. Cary Grant always wears this model. How 'bout it, men? (Both nod yes.) Of course, included for only half a dolla more is our fawml bow tie and matchin' botteneer. I would suggest the maroon.

Ralph: Sounds great.

Schwartz: Isn't that everything?

AL: Is that all! You gotta be kiddin', sonny. How do you expect to trip the light fantastic without a pair a black patent-leatha dancin' pumps?

Ralph: Dancin' what?

AL: Shoes, shoes, and we throw in the socks for nuttin. How 'bout it?

Ralph: Well, uh...

AL: Fine! So that's it, boys. I'll have everything all ready the day before the Prom. You'll really knock 'em dead. (RALPH and SCHWARTZ walk out of AL's store. They pass a store window in which can be seen a reflection of a steel mill. A loud klaxon sounds.)

Narrator: One week to go; less, now, because you couldn't count the day of the Prom itself. My cowardly soul, could I ever ask Daphne Bigelow for a date? A softness was in the air, a quickening of the pulse. Expectation long lying dormant in the blackened rock ice of winter sent out tentative tender green shoots and yawned toward the smoky sun. (RALPH, outside his house now, picks up the hose and starts to sprinkle the lawn.) I sank into a moody sea of reflection. Was I going to boot the Prom? All week, I had been cleaning up my Ford for the big night. Everything

was set to go, except for one thing—no girl. A feeling of helpless rage settled over me. I sprinkled on, not knowing that another piece was being fitted into the intricate mosaic of adolescence.

Wanda: What are you doing?

(Startled, RALPH flings the hose around, spraying the white figure on the sidewalk ten feet away, dressed in tennis clothes.)

Ralph: I'm sorry! Oh, hi, Wanda. I didn't see you there.

(WANDA dries herself with a Kleenex.)

Wanda: What are you doing?

Ralph: I'm sprinkling the lawn. You been playing tennis?

Wanda: Me and Eileen Akers were playing. Down at the park. I'm sure glad school's almost over. I can hardly wait. I never thought I'd be a senior.

Ralph: Yeah.

Wanda: I'm going to camp this summer. Are you? (WANDA swings her tennis racket at a June bug that flaps above. She misses. The bug soars angrily up and whirs off.) Are you going to college when you graduate next year?

Ralph: Yeah, I guess so, if I don't get drafted.

Wanda: My brother's in the Army. He's in the Artillery.

Ralph: Yeah, I heard. Does he like it?

Wanda: Well, he doesn't write much. But he's gonna get a pass next September, before he goes overseas.

Ralph: How come he's in the Artillery?

Wanda: I don't know. They just put him there. I guess because he's tall.

Ralph: What's that gotta do with it? Do they have to throw the shells, or something?

Wanda: I don't know. They just did it.

Ralph (after a moment's hesitation): You going to the Prom?

(For a long instant WANDA says nothing, just swings her tennis racket at the air.)

Wanda (weakly): I guess so.

Ralph: It's gonna be great.

Wanda: Uh... who are you going with?

Ralph: Well, I haven't exactly made up my mind yet. (He bends down unconcernedly and pulls a giant milkweed out by the roots.)

Wanda: Neither have I.

(They look at each other, frozen in time.)

Narrator: It was then that I realized there was no sense fighting it. Some guys are born to dance forever with the Daphne Bigelows on shining ballroom floors under endless stary

skies. Others—well, they do the best they can.

Ralph: Wanda?

Wanda: Yes?

Ralph: Wanda. Would you... well... I mean... would you, you see, I was thinking...

Wanda: Yes?

Narrator (*whispering*): Here I go in over the horns.

Ralph: Wanda, uh... how about... going to the Prom with me?

Narrator: She stopped twitching her tennis racket. The crickets cheeped, the spring air was filled with the sound of singing froglets. A soft breeze carried with it the promise of a rich summer and the vibrant aromas of a nearby refinery.

Wanda: Of course, I've had a lot of invitations, but I didn't say yes to any of them yet. I guess it would be fun to go with you.

Ralph: Yeah, well, naturally, I've had four or five girls who wanted to go with me, but I figured that they were mostly jerks anyway, and... ah... I meant to ask you all along.

(As the camera slowly pulls back and up, RALPH and WANDA grow smaller and smaller. The sun has almost set and already the steelworks have begun to reflect their glow in the evening sky.)

Narrator: The die was cast. There was no turning back. It was an ironclad rule. Once a girl was asked to the Prom, only a total crumb would even consider ducking out of it. There had been one or two cases in the past, but the perpetrators had become social pariahs, driven from the tribe to fend for themselves in the unfriendly woods. *(Pause.)* The great Atlantic salmon struggling thousands of miles upstream, leaping waterfalls, battling bears to mate is nothing compared to your average high school junior. The salmon dies in the attempt, and so, often does the junior, in more ways than one. As we ambled on through the gloom, I didn't have the slightest hint of what was coming; neither, I suppose, does the salmon. He just does what he has to do. So did I.

(RALPH and SCHWARTZ are at school, hurrying through the halls between classes on their way to their lockers.)

Ralph: Hey, Schwartz, how about double-dating for the Prom?

Schwartz: Great! I'll help you clean up the car.

Ralph: I've already simonized her. She's all set.

Schwartz: Are you gonna send Daphne an orchid, or what?



Ralph: Well, no...

Schwartz: What do you mean? Ya gotta send a corsage.

Ralph: Well, I am going to send a corsage.

Schwartz: I thought you said you weren't.

Ralph: I never said I wasn't gonna send a corsage.

Schwartz: Are you nuts? You just said you weren't gonna.

Ralph: I'm not gonna send a corsage to Daphne Bigelow. You asked me if I was gonna send a corsage to Daphne. I'm not.

Schwartz: She's gonna think you're a real cheapskate.

Ralph: Schwartz, I have decided not to ask Daphne Bigelow to the Prom.

(SCHWARTZ stops and looks directly at RALPH, causing him to slam into two strolling freshmen girls. Their books slide across the floor, where they are trampled underfoot by the thundering mob.)

Schwartz: Well, who are you taking?

Ralph: Wanda Hickey.

Schwartz: Wanda Hickey!

(They walk on, saying nothing, until finally, they reach their lockers.)

Schwartz: Well, she sure is good at algebra.

(It is afternoon and RALPH is seated at one of the study hall tables. His books are open, but he is staring absently across the room at WANDA, who, unaware of him, is busily at work.)

Narrator: She was kind of cute. I'd never really noticed it before. Ever since second grade, Wanda had just been there. Along with Aileen Akers, Helen Weathers, and all the other girls who—along with me and Schwartz and Flick and the rest—had moved together step by step up the creaky ladder of education. And here I was, at long last, taking Wanda Hickey—Wanda Hickey—to the Prom, the only Junior Prom I would ever attend in my life. Ahead, our long summer in the sun stretched out like a lazy yellow road. For many of us, it was the last peaceful summer we were to know. *(RALPH is busily doing sums in his notebook.)* The eight dollars for the orchid didn't help. Schwartz and I split on the gas, which would come to maybe a buck apiece. After paying for the summer formal I had a fast ten dollars left for

the night. My 24 dollars was shrinking fast. *(SCHWARTZ, who is seated behind RALPH, passes a note to him: "How about the Red Rooster afterwards?"* RALPH writes, "Where else?" and passes the note back to SCHWARTZ.) The Red Rooster was part of the tribal ritual. It was the place you went after a big date. If you could afford it. *(RALPH glances across the room at WANDA and catches her looking at him. She instantly buries her head in her book.)* Good old Wanda.

(RALPH is seated at the kitchen table eating a liverwurst on whole wheat and drinking a glass of chocolate milk. It's nighttime. The back door slams open and DAD enters, carrying his bowling bag. He slides the bag across the floor, pretending to lay one down the groove, his right arm held out in a graceful follow-through, right leg trailing in the classic bowling stance.)

Dad: Right in the pocket.

Ralph: How'd you do tonight?

Dad: Not bad. Had a two-oh-seven game. Almost cracked six hundred. *(DAD opens the refrigerator and fishes around for a beer, then sits down heavily, taking a deep drag from the bottle, burping loudly.)* Well, tomorrow's the big day, ain't it?

Ralph: Yep, sure is.

Dad: You takin' Daphne Bigelow?

Ralph: Nah. Wanda Hickey.

Dad: Oh yeah? Well, you can't win 'em all. Wanda's old man is some kind of a foreman at the mill or something, ain't he?

Ralph: I guess so.

Dad: He drives a Studebaker Champion, don't he? The green two-door with the whitewalls. Not a bad car. Except they burn oil after a while. They used to have a weak front end. Bad kingpins. *(DAD shakes his head critically, opens another beer, and reaches for the rye bread.)* How ya fixed for tomorrow night?

Ralph: What do you mean?

Dad: I mean, how are ya fixed?

Ralph: Well, I've got about ten bucks.

Dad: Hmm. *(There is silence for a moment or two.)* You know, I always wished I coulda gone to a Prom. Oh well. *(DAD cuts himself a slice of boiled ham and makes a sandwich.)* I was really hot tonight. Got a string of six straight strikes in the second game. The old hook was movin', getting a lot of wood. *(He reaches into his hip pocket, takes out his wallet.)* Look, don't tell Ma. *(He hands RALPH a \$20 bill.)* I had a couple of bets going on the second game, and

I'm a money bowler.

(They both continue to eat their sandwiches, looking at each other but saying nothing.)

Narrator: I was so astounded at this unprecedented gesture that it never occurred to me to say thanks. He would have been embarrassed if I had. A miracle had come to pass. There was no doubt about it—the Prom was to be an unqualified gas. *(Camera holds on open bathroom door. From inside can be heard the sound of splashing water, followed by a muffled curse from RALPH. Finally he appears in the doorway. He is wearing a towel and his face is bedecked with little pieces of toilet paper. His hair is smoothed flat. Camera follows him along to his bedroom. His entire summer formal ensemble is laid out on the bed.)* The evening of the Prom had arrived. Twilight was fast approaching when I emerged from the bathroom, redolent of rare aromas, pink and svelte. But the real battle had not yet begun. Al was right: the elegant white coat truly gleamed in virginal splendor. Not a trace of the red stain nor the sinister hole could be detected. The

coat was ready for another night of celebration. *(RALPH begins to get dressed. After donning his shirt, he is annoyed to find it has no buttons. Desperately he rummages in the box and discovers the studs in an envelope. He opens the envelope and they inevitably slip from his grasp and disappear under the bed. RALPH tries to retrieve them.)* Although I didn't know it at the time, I had observed a classic maneuver executed by at least one stud out of every set rented with a tux. I was already beginning to lose my Lifebuoy sheen. *(RALPH finally succeeds in recovering the studs and turns to the mirror to fit them in his shirt. There is a tremendous struggle. Suddenly two large smudgy fingerprints appear on the collar of the shirt.)*

Ralph *(screaming):* Ma! Look at my shirt!

(MOTHER rushes in from the kitchen, carrying a paring knife and a pan of apples.)

Mother: What's the matter?

Ralph: Look!

Mother: Don't touch it. *(She darts out of the room and returns instantly with an artgum eraser.)* Now hold

still. *(She carefully works the stud in place and then artistically erases the two monstrous thumbprints.)*

Where's your tie?

Ralph *(strangling under the tightness of the collar):* It...ack... must be... in the box.

(MOTHER rummages around and finds the bow tie. It is black and has two metal clips. She snaps it onto the wing collar and stands back.)

Mother: Now, look at yourself in the mirror. *(MOTHER picks up the midnight-blue trousers and holds them open, so that RALPH can slip into them without bending over.)* Gimme your foot.

(MOTHER is down on all fours, pulling the silky black socks onto RALPH's feet. Then, out of a box on the bed, she removes the gleaming pair of patent-leather dancing pumps, grabs RALPH's right foot, and shoves it into one of them, using her finger as a shoehorn. RALPH tromps down. MOTHER squeals in pain.) I can't get my finger out! *(RALPH hobbles around.)* Stand still! *(RALPH stands like a crane, one foot in the air. His MOTHER tugs off the shoe, then topples back-*



ward in relief, rubbing her index finger. RALPH straightens up and the other shoe is put on without further incident.) What's this thing?

Ralph: Oh, that's my cummerbund.

Mother (smiling): A cummerbund! How does it work? Oh, I see. It has clips on the back. Hold still. (MOTHER snaps the cummerbund on RALPH, holds out the white coat which he puts on, and then darts round to the front to do up the single button. RALPH quickly goes to survey himself in the bathroom mirror. MOTHER calls out from the next room.) Hey, what's this thing? (SHE comes out holding a cellophane bag containing a maroon object.)

Ralph: Oh, that's my boutonniere.

Mother: Your what?

Ralph: It's a thing for the lapel. Like a fake flower.

(RALPH saunters out the front door, turns, and gives his MOTHER a jaunty wave. She calls him back just in time to give him WANDA's corset. RALPH gets into the car and drives off. He pulls up at WANDA's house. She is out on the porch, her MOTHER fluttering about her, her FATHER lurking in the background, beaming.)

Narrator: With stately tread, I moved up the walk. My pants were so tight that if I'd taken one false step, who knows what would have happened. In my sweaty, Aqua-Velva-scented palm, I clutched the ritual largess in its shiny box. (RALPH reaches WANDA, who is wearing a long turquoise taffeta gown. Her milky skin and golden hair radiate in the glow of the porch light.) This was not the old Wanda. For one thing, she didn't have her glasses on, and her eyes were unnaturally large and liquid, the way the true myopia victim's always are.

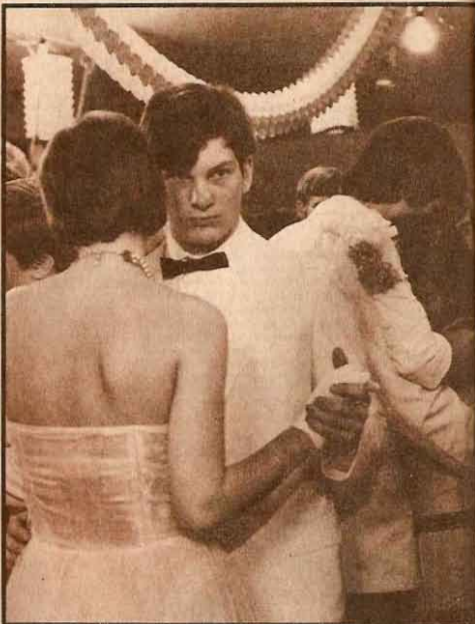
Wanda: Gee, thanks for the orchid.

Narrator: Her voice sounded strained. In accordance with the tribal custom, she, too, was being mercilessly clamped by straps and girdles.

Wanda's Mother: You'll take care of her now, won't you?

Wanda's Father: Now, Emily, don't start yapping. They're not kids anymore.

(WANDA and RALPH enter car and drive down the road. The car pulls up in front of SCHWARTZ's house. He jumps in. The car pulls up in front of CLARA MAE's house. She jumps in. Dissolve to shot of parking lot in front of Cherrywood Country Club as streams of cars pull in. We see RALPH and friends jump out of the car and thread their way





fore a microphone shaped like a chromium bullet, announces in a metallic voice, ringing with feedback.)

Mickey Eisley: All right, boys and girls. And now something really rowdy. A request: "When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano." We're going to turn the lights down for this one.

(The lights fade. Only the Japanese lantern glow dimly—red, green, yellow and blue—in the enchanted darkness. WANDA and RALPH begin to maneuver around the floor.)

Narrator: It was unquestionably the high point of my existence. My sole experience in dancing had been gained from reading Arthur Murray ads and practicing with a pillow for a partner behind the locked door of the bathroom. As we shuffled across the floor, I could see the black footprints before my eyes, marching on a white page: 1-2-3; then the white one that said, "Pause." *(Back and forth, up and down, they move metronomically. RALPH's box step is so square that he goes in little right angles. The wool carnation rides high up on his lapel and begins to scratch his cheek and an insistent itch begins to nag his right shoulder. By now, the collar and its incessant abrasive action has removed a wide strip of skin encircling his neck.)*

Narrator: Wanda's orchid was leering up at me from her shoulder. It was the most repulsive flower I had ever seen. It looked like some kind of overgrown venus's-flytrap waiting for the right moment to strike. Deep purple, with an obscene yellow tongue that stuck straight out of it, and greenish knobs on the end, it clashed almost audibly with her tur-

quoise dress. It looked like it was breathing, and it clung to her shoulder as if with claws. *"When the deeeep purpurrlll falllllllls... over sleeeeccepy gaardennnnwaillllls..." warbles the vocalist into his microphone, with which he seems to be dancing the tango.* Wanda started to sweat through her taffeta. I felt it running down her back. My own back was already so wet you could read the label on my undershirt right through the dinner jacket. Back and forth we trudged doggedly across the crowded floor. Another Arthur Murray ad man, Schwartz, was doing exactly the same step with Clara Mae directly behind me. We were all in a four-part lock step. *(In contrast to the description in the narration, the camera covers the dance romantically, with star filters, swirling gowns, mirror balls, etc.)* The orchid was getting riper by the minute and the sweat, which had now saturated my jockey shorts, was pouring down my legs in rivulets. My soaked cummerbund turned two shades darker. So that she shouldn't notice, I pulled Wanda closer to me. Sighing, she hugged me back. Wanda was the vaguely chubby type of girl that was so popular at the time. She strongly resembled a pink beach ball—but a cute beach ball, soft and rubbery. I felt bumpy things under her taffeta gown, with little hooks and knobs. Schwartz caught me a nasty shot in the rib cage just as I bent over to kiss her lightly on the bridge of her nose. It tasted salty. She looked up at me, her great, liquid, myopic eyes catching the reflection of the red and green lanterns overhead. *(The dance ends, and RALPH and SCHWARTZ*

through the crowd and into the club.)

Narrator: I found myself saying things like, "Why, hello there, Albert, how are you?" and, "Yes, I believe the weather is perfect." Mickey Eisley and his Magic Music Makers struck up the sultry sounds that had made them famous in every steel-mill town that ringed Lake Michigan. Dark and sensuous, the dance floor engulfed us all. I felt tall, slim and beautiful, not realizing at the time that everybody feels that way wearing a white coat and rented pants. I could see myself standing on a mysterious balcony, a lonely, elegant figure, looking out over the lights of some exotic city, a scene of sophisticated gaiety behind me.

(A hush descends on the dance floor as MICKEY EISLEY, standing be-



saunter to the bar, where they collect four paper cups filled with a purplish liquid and begin to wend their way back to their table. RALPH bumps into a girl.)

Daphne: Hi, Howard.

Ralph: Hi, Daph.

Daphne: Oh, Howard, I'd like you to meet Budge. Budge Cameron. He's at Princeton. Budge, this is Howard.

Budge: Hiya, fella.

(The dance continues. The orchestra plays "Sleepy Lagoon." RALPH and WANDA look increasingly hot, sweaty, uncomfortable and disheveled. The band plays "Good-night Sweetheart." The dance is obviously over. We follow RALPH and WANDA outside where a huge downpour has just commenced. They stand hesitantly under the canopy for a moment.)

Ralph: You guys stay here. I'll get the car. (RALPH races through the downpour to his convertible. There is already a foot of water in the bottom, which pours out as he opens the door. RALPH tries to raise the roof by pushing the button. The canopy raises half-way and jams. Cursing, with rain pouring down his face, his hair matted in front of his eyes, RALPH continues to pound the relay button. Finally the top closes. RALPH tries to start the engine but the effort of raising the top has obviously drained the battery. It is now completely dead. RALPH yells out the window at a passing car. It is FLICK in his Chevy.) Gimme a push! My battery's dead!

Narrator: This had never, to my knowledge happened to Fred Astaire. And if it rained on Gene Kelly, he just sang. (FLICK swings his car behind RALPH's, gives it a push, and the car finally starts. FLICK leans out his window.)

Flick: See you at the Rooster.

(RALPH drives over to pick up SCHWARTZ, WANDA and CLARA MAE. They leap in and the car moves off into the downpour.)

Narrator: Do you know what happens to a maroon-wool carnation on a white-serge lapel in a heavy June downpour in the Midwest, where it rains not water, but carbohic acid from the steelmill fallout? (Camera cuts to a dark, wide, spreading maroon stripe that goes all the way down to the bottom of Ralph's white coat. The French cuffs are covered with grease from fighting the top, and RALPH has cracked a thumb-nail, which is beginning to throb.) Undaunted he slogged intrepidly through the rain toward the Red



Rooster. (Wedge against his side, WANDA looks up at him—oblivious to the elements, with luminous love in her eyes. She is truly an incurable romantic. SCHWARTZ wisecracks in the back seat and CLARA giggles from time to time.) The savage tribal right was nearing its final and most vicious phase. (Dissolve to a sign of a giant red neon rooster with a blue neon tail that flicks up and down in the rain. RALPH's car swings into the parking lot amid much giggling. Everyone runs into the doorway.) An aura of undefined sin was always connected with the Red Rooster. Sly winks, nudgings, and adolescent cacklings about what purportedly went on at the Rooster made it the "in" spot for such a momentous revel. Its waiters were rumored really to be secret henchmen of the Mafia. But the only thing we knew for sure about the Rooster was that anybody on the far side of seven years old could procure any known drink without question. The jukebox, in full 200-watt operation, could be felt, if not clearly heard, as far north as Gary and as far south as Kankakee. A triumph of American aesthetics. (RALPH guides WANDA through the uproarious throng of peers. SCHWARTZ and CLARA MAE

trail behind, exchanging remarks with the gang. They sit at the only remaining table. Immediately a beady-eyed WAITER with vaseline hair-oil hands them the Red Rooster a la carte deluxe menu. He then stands back, smirking, and waiting for the order.)

Waiter: Can I bring you anything to drink, gentlemen?

Ralph: Uh... make mine... bourbon. (SCHWARTZ grunts in admiration.

WANDA ogles at RALPH with great swimming, lovesick eyes.)

Waiter: How will you have it, sir?

Ralph: Well, in a glass, I guess.

Waiter: Rocks?

Ralph (recklessly): Sure. Why not?

And make it a triple.

Waiter: A triple? Yes, sir. (To SCHWARTZ.) And you, sir?

Schwartz: Make it the same.

Waiter: And for the ladies? (RALPH and SCHWARTZ eye each other blankly.) May I humbly suggest, sir, two Pink Ladies? (They nod approval and the WAITER departs with their order. An embarrassed silence descends on the table. It is finally broken by RALPH, who picks up menus and hands them round the table. The WAITER returns with the drinks and places one before each of them. To RALPH.) And will we be ordering dinner tonight?

Ralph: I would like lamb chops, yellow turnips, mashed potatoes and gravy, a side dish of the Red Rooster Roquefort Italian Cole Slaw—and a strawberry shortcake.

(Even the WAITER seems impressed



by the immensity of RALPH's order. He turns to the others who have been listening to RALPH in amazement.)

Waiter: And the rest of you?

Schwartz: I think we'll just stick with our drinks.

Narrator: Moment by moment, I felt my strength and maturity, my dashing bonhomie, my clean-cut handsomeness enveloping my friends in its benevolent warmth. Schwartz, too, seemed to scintillate as never before. Clara giggled and Wanda sighed, overcome by the romance of it all. Even when Flick, sitting three tables away, clipped Schwartz behind the left ear with a poppyseed roll, our urbanity remained unruined. (RALPH brings the bourbon to his lips, intending to down it in a single, devil-may-care draught, the way Gary Cooper used to do in the Silver Dollar Saloon. He does so and SCHWARTZ follows suit.) Down it went—a screaming 90-proof rocket searing savagely down my gullet. For an instant, I sat stunned, unable to comprehend what had happened.

(RALPH's eyes begin to water, and he turns purple. SCHWARTZ appears from under the table, as he tries to reset himself. His face is beet-red and his eyes are bugging, his jaw slack and his tongue bobbing.)

Wanda (her voice seems far away): Isn't this romantic? Isn't this the most wonderful night in all our lives? I will forever treasure the memories of this wonderful night.

(RALPH struggles to reply, to maintain his élan. Finally he manages with superhuman effort.)

Ralph: Urk...urk...yeah.

Waiter (smirking): Another, gents?

(SCHWARTZ nods dumbly. An instant later, two more triple bourbons materialize.)

Clara Mae: Let's drink to the happiest night of our lives.

Narrator: There was no turning back. Another screamer rocketed down the hatch. For an instant, it seemed as though this one wasn't going to be as lethal as the first. Then... (RALPH downs his drink. Suddenly the room seems to lurch sideways.) The conflagration deep inside me was now clearly out of control. My feet were smoking; my diaphragm heaved convulsively, jiggling my cummerbund; and Schwartz began to shrink, his face alternating between purple-red and chalk-white, his eyes black holes staring fixedly at the ketchup bottle. He sat stock-still. Wanda, meanwhile, cooed on ecstatically—but I was beyond understanding what she was saying. (Out of the maelstrom,

suddenly a plate and hand mysteriously enter frame. It is a paper-painted lamb chop hissing in bubbly grease, piled yellow turnips, gray mashed potatoes awash in rich brown gravy. The plate swings dangerously in and out of frame and focus. A fork enters the frame and attempts to spear the chop. Suddenly the fork misses, sending the chop spinning off the plate and into the aisle between the tables. The fork enters the frame and chases the other chop around the plate. RALPH leans closer to it, until he is only an inch from its surface. We see him desperately eating everything on the plate. Camera then pans to strawberry shortcake piled high with whipped cream. The fork enters and rapidly demolishes that also. The plates are now clean. The camera sways from side to side and becomes increasingly out of focus. RALPH rises and staggers through the tables towards a door with a sign on it which swims in and out of his vision. RALPH falls through door marked "Men's Room" and is immediately followed by SCHWARTZ, also staggering.) Lamb chops, bourbon, turnips, mashed potatoes, cole slaw—all of it came rushing out of me in a great roaring torrent—out of my mouth, my nose, my ears, my very soul. Then Schwartz opened up and we took turns retching and shuddering. A head thrust itself between us directly into the pot. It was Flick, moaning wretchedly. The three of us stood there limp and quivering, smelling to high heaven, too weak to move. It was the absolute high point of the Junior Prom; the rest was anticlimax.

(The door opens and, ashen-faced, the three slowly return to their tables. RALPH has lost his tie and his shirt is open. Long moments pass; but gradually RALPH and SCHWARTZ resume their balance. The WAITER arrives and hands RALPH the check.)

Waiter: The damages, gentlemen.

(Without looking at the check, RALPH fumbles in his jacket, drags out the \$20 bill, and hands it to the WAITER.)

Ralph: Keep the change.

(The car drives through the night. WANDA gazes with unconcealed ecstasy at RALPH. SCHWARTZ sits in the back, his head between his knees, saying nothing, but belching occasionally. RALPH drops off SCHWARTZ and CLARA MAE, and drives through the dawn to WANDA's house. The car stops in front. They both get out and walk up

to the porch.

Narrator: We stood on her porch for the last ritual encounter. A chill dawn wind rustled the lilac bushes.

Wanda: This was the most wonderful, wonderful night of my whole life. I always dreamed the Prom would be like this.

Ralph: Me too.

Narrator: I knew what was expected of me now. (WANDA's eyes close dreamily. RALPH, swaying slightly, leans forward.) The faint odor of sauerkraut from her parted lips coiled slowly up to my nostrils. This was not in the script.

(RALPH gets off the porch fast, backpedaling desperately, and down the stairs, blurting "Bye." He jumps into the car and races off, leaving WANDA staring after him, alone on the porch. RALPH's car screeches round the corner and stops in front of a vacant lot. RALPH leans out. The sound of retching can be heard. It stops finally and the car slowly moves off into the sunrise. At home, in the kitchen, Ralph's FATHER is reading the paper. The car pulls up. RALPH enters. In the cold light of day we can see how disheveled he really looks. His FATHER looks up.)

Father: You look like you had a hell of a Prom.

Ralph: I sure did.

Father (sardonically): You want anything to eat? (RALPH shakes his head.) That's what I thought. Get some sleep. You'll feel better in a couple of days, when your head stops banging.

(FATHER turns back to his newspaper. RALPH slowly heads upstairs. His cummerbund falls off and lays at the bottom of the stairs. Camera holds on the stairs as RALPH disappears into his bedroom.)

Narrator: The male human animal, skulking through the impenetrable fetid jungle of Kidhood, learns early in the game just what sort of animal he is. The jungle he stalks is a howling tangled wilderness, infested with crawling, flying, leaping, nameless dangers. There are occasional brilliant patches of rare, passionate orchids and other sweet flowers and succulent fruits, but they are rare. He daily does battle with horrors and emotions that he will spend the rest of his life trying to forget or suppress. Or recapture. His jungle is a wilderness he will never fully escape, but those first early years, when the bloom is on the peach and the milk teeth have just barely departed, are the crucial days in the Great Education of Life. (Fade to black.) **LC**