

THE UMBRELLA GIRL

In the seventeenth year of my life I somehow gained the attention of a remarkable young woman, whom I have come to refer to as the Umbrella Girl. Up until the time that I looked out across the gymnasium and first saw her, my first year and a half at St. John Vianney High School had been marked by an unremitting wretchedness, the result of a combination of shyness and rage whose roots were set deep by the time my life entered environments that required socializing. I might make fellow students at my all-boys school laugh at my outrageous behavior during classes--loudly wisecracking, then talking back to the teacher when corrected--but their laughter only drew them as close as I would allow. Out by the lockers, if someone referred to my latest confrontation with a teacher, I might be bluff and hearty but more often I just fell into a stricken silence.

Not long before I first encountered the Umbrella Girl, I had decided to become different from what I had been. I did not know how I could be different, but reasoned that because I was not an athlete and loved to read books, perhaps I should try on the persona of the model student. It was a strange fit at first, but its strangeness diminished with passing time. I adopted this persona even in the boring classes where I had staged my disruptions. Outside of my mind, and within a short time, the small teeming world of my high school began to take notice. As I settled into serious study, the confrontations with teachers dropped off (though one or two teachers continued to irritate me helplessly.) My grades rose to a uniformly high level. The top slots on the Dean's List had always been held by a predictable coterie and my customary mix of A's and D's had kept my average far out of range of that list, but then, at the end of the first semester of my junior year, there was my name in the middle of the list. At the end of the second semester, it appeared in the number five slot. For two days I was assailed by remarks from surprised friends and begrudging competitors. I had attained a new status.

My new status emboldened me, though just perceptibly. I began to rely less on anger and outrageousness to draw attention to myself and to experiment more often with direct interactions with my peers, both scholastic and social. I allowed

conversations to drift on past the point where I'd once felt their implicit attention surpassed an amount that I deserved, accepted invitations and believed, guardedly, that they had been sincerely offered. At the beginning of my junior year, I even strayed into areas of the school's so-called social life, the best that could be managed within the walls of an all-boys school. Up until then, I had attended only a few of the dances; the shock of entering the dimmed gymnasium suddenly replete with girls had always been too much for me to handle. The first breath of that air, so redolent with fragrances, made me stammer. Normally, my behavior among my peers would veer from intriguingly strange to bitingly sarcastic and finally plunge into plain goofy. Once, after I'd just ventured to enter the dimmed gymnasium in the middle of mixer, I blundered onto a couple near the rolled back stands. The irritated boy looked up with lipstick smeared like jam around his mouth. The sight shocked me so strongly that I left the dance and went home.

I preferred the gym in its lit state. I began attending basketball games, for no other reason really than because my new small group of kind friends repeatedly invited me to accompany them. I arrived so late for one game that every good spot in the bleachers had been covered by boys and the few dozen women brought along as dates. I heard my name called above the crowd noise and spotted my friends waving to me from the first row.

I went up to this group of three, encouraged by their exuberant welcome to strike a pose of casual unawareness of the game pounding heatedly along behind me. "So where do I sit?" I asked the packed line.

"We tried to hold a place for you," said Tom Decker, a thin boy who was my main competitor in mechanical drawing.

"Stand up," I ordered. "You can sit on my lap."

"Are you kidding?"

"Come on. Who cares?"

Obediently, Tom rose and then reseated himself on my knees. "We'll pretend you're a dummy," said Peter Arkinasian.

"We won't have to pretend," said Marty Wills. He hooted at his own joke, and then coughed asthmatically.

I looked past Tom's shoulder. "Pathetic," I said. "We have to import our cheerleaders." I was referring to a short line of cheerleaders who, by arrangement, came in from Ursuline Academy, an all-girls Catholic school.

"Import!" Marty echoed, and my pals laughed.

In the first row, we were so close to the cheerleaders that we could hear the rustling of their pom-poms above the slap and squeak of the basketball game. The girls pranced and leapt, then came up closer to the stands and turned and knelt on one knee for a while, then got up at a signal from their captain and went out to prance and leap some more. I felt sorry for them. They seemed so unconnected to the drama at hand. No one really knew these girls, I guessed; they weren't the girlfriends of any boy I knew; I never saw any of them at the few dances I attended. They were bussed in at the beginning of the game and bussed out at the end of it, back to their boyless environment. I felt I understood their loneliness.

The cheerleader at the end nearest me now rose and walked a few feet onto the polished wooden floor. As she walked, I could see the muscles in her calves forming graceful curves. I had never associated muscles with girls before, but those calves, though hardly thick, looked so firm and strong. It made my breath shorten to see how closely the cuffs of her socks encased the upward flare of them. When she turned, her skirt swirled up and revealed her round smooth knees. Under her large white sweater, with a huge maroon V stitched to its center, I discerned the shape of her small breasts. I looked to her face. It was smooth and pale, with brown eyes darker for her paleness. Those eyes were looking directly at me.

I continued to look into her eyes because I felt certain they would soon look away. But they did not look away, and with every passing second my heart beat harder in rising panic. Finally, the girl had to execute a turn, and when the bonding of our gazes snapped I looked off gratefully into the game. It struck me that what the girl had been looking at was a boy who peered at her over the shoulder of

another boy whom I held on my lap. Normally, such a realization might cause me to feel humiliated to the extreme, even groan aloud, but the girl's look had been quizzical, open, considering. With instinctive logic, I concluded that it was curiosity that had brought those dark eyes my way. I could think of no qualities of mine that would in themselves have had the power to draw them. Still, the effect of a girl's considering me, even for a moment, as a human being, filled my heart as a warm breeze might fill a sail.

Meanwhile, the doe-eyed cheerleader had completed her final maneuver and walked back to her spot near to me and my friends. I heard myself call out to her, "Hey, want a seat? There's plenty of room!"

When she turned to look at me, Tommy Decker shifted sideways with a laugh. A strange feeling of exposure and vulnerability invaded me as more of my body was revealed to the girl. I clutched Tommy to me, pretending that my friend was in danger of toppling.

In the next moment, all the cheerleaders turned to face the crowd and lead it in a chant. My friends and I all chanted out of sequence, just to be oh-so clever. Between her shouts, a tiny smile rested on the lips of the girl to whom I'd called. She did not kneel down with the others after the cheer; instead, she walked closer and stood before me and Tommy. She was there, real, standing before us.

"What's going on here?" she asked. Her voice was surprisingly soft for a cheerleader's.

I nodded at Tommy. "This," I said, "is my son."

The girl laughed and looked away. She shook her head and the whole mass of her dark hair moved.

I stared after her. The phenomenon of her laughing had lasted only a second, yet the myriad sensations of it imbedded themselves like glowing particles in my brain. At the last word of my joke, her mouth had broadened instantly and then opened to reveal twin rows of white teeth and a deep, soft cup of wet pink tissue. Her wide tongue had humped briefly and her eyelids had risen so that her dark

brown irises had stared round and centered from their fields of white. In short, her whole face had exploded into an emblem of delight. I could scarcely consider that I had caused this transformation. The sound of the girl's laughter, the quick ha-ha-ha's strung on a legato of helplessly expelled breath, echoed through my mind as if my skull had been emptied to retain them. The experience was similar to but infinitely more powerful than the feeling I had when a boy laughed at one of my jokes. Nothing had ever made me feel so wonderful. I wanted more of this feeling. "You sure you don't want a seat?" I yelled, nearly delirious.

"And where would I sit?" she called back.

My mind worked furiously through a set of possible responses. If I said something about sitting on her ass, that would strike her as coarse and she might laugh a little but her face would harden. The prospect was sad to the extreme. I could say something about sitting on Tommy Decker's lap, and that might be funny but not so funny as to draw another sounded laugh from her--and that was the objective. But time was passing. I shifted Tommy bodily and slid out one leg. "On my free knee," I said.

It was hardly a clever statement, but still I was disappointed when she only smiled at it. I had no second chance because all at once all my friends had caught the flirt infection and were crying out to her.

Marty Wills yelled, "Why don't you lie across all our laps?"

Poor Peter Arkinasian managed only an enthusiastic "Yeahhh!"

Tommy Decker picked up on my earlier son joke. "Hurry up, before Mom gets back!"

I could see that the girl was enduring all of this good naturally. She simply stood, one hip tipped out, and smiled, tolerant but unencouraging. From behind the protective cover of Tommy Decker, I looked at that tipped out hip. I had a sense of bone, solid bone, sculpted round with flesh, girl flesh. When I looked at her face, I discovered that her eyes were watching me again.

"What's your name?" I asked, just loudly enough to be heard above a sudden surge of crowd noise. The cheerleader captain was calling out some signal that was tugging her eyes away from mine.

"Anne."

"Anne what?"

"Anne Cullen."

She receded then, drawn off deeper into the gymnasium to become an animated figure before the rolling, buckling game. I realized I had hardly distinguished a single pattern to the mass of unceasing motion behind the girl. "Anne Cullen, Anne Cullen," I said against the back of Tommy Decker's head. Her eyes had again flitted to my face. Had they seen my lips shaping her name?

Anne Cullen, Anne Cullen. The name whispered in my consciousness unceasingly in the weeks that followed. The image of her eyes, moist and dark, placed perfectly in the smooth pale prettiness of her face, hovered within the sound of her name. I loved the name, loved the sound of it, how its two parts made one quick word that ended neatly on the clipped closure of its final syllable. The name was the girl, and the girl was as strong and pretty as the name.

And so began the fatal workings that would direct me to a wounding failure--or so I would think at the time. As a purist, as a sensitized soul, as one only just emerging from the self-disgust that is the birthright of the greater part of the race, the impact of a whole, breathing, brown-eyed, kind-hearted girl embodied an emotional mass too considerable to be borne. I was to struggle long and hard to move its wonderfulness into the narrow ken of my immature life, and perhaps that is the important point here, how much living had to be first accomplished.

But with no foreknowledge to deter me, and perhaps according to the good reasons of certain powers not to supply it, the matter of my loving Anne Cullen went forward in complex and mystifying stages. At first, out in the open with no Tommy Decker to hide behind, I lapsed into the miserable posture of a shy boy in love. I had never been on a date. I had not the slightest clue what to do with the extraordinary

volume of feelings that welled up within me at every other waking moment. I endured until the next basketball game, which I attended, again in the company of the same friends, but I was to learn that extraordinary experiences cannot be replicated by mere willing. For one thing, this time I had to sit far up in the stands. She was there, more wonderful in the flesh than she had been in memory, but at such a distance. The geography seemed unmanageable, souring my mood and sapping my courage. Twice, from the floor, her eyes actually did scan up to meet mine. The first time I felt myself react as if I'd been slapped. I could feel my whole face, already ruined by acne, reddening hideously. I noted how quickly her gaze flitted away, embarrassed for me and thereby increasing my embarrassment. By the time our eyes met the second time, I'd regained just enough self-control to wrench upwards the edges of my lips. Many minutes later, I wondered if the softness that had shown at the edges of her eyes might have been a form of gratefulness.

All through the second half, as the two teams waged their furious competition, I waged an equally furious battle within myself. Could I drag my thin, unappealing body within speaking range of her? Would she forgive my pimples and uncooperative hair to the point where she might speak to me again? Fate was unkind. At the end of the game, the crowd channeled the cheerleading squad towards a distant exit. I thought to appear at her side as if by accident by threading the crowd and getting to the outside before she and her fellow cheerleaders came through the steel double-doors, but I became ensnared by my little group of friends--or I was unwilling to risk their jeers by dashing from them--and by the time I got outside I could see the van that deposited and removed the cheerleaders already loaded and waiting down the way to move into the traffic line. I turned away quickly, before Anne Cullen, possibly watching out of one of those windows, could witness my ineptness.

I entered a life of waking dreams, consciously forcing myself to dress and eat and study during moments when I could press thoughts of Anne Cullen farther back into my mind. Still, I found myself spontaneously confessing my feelings at odd moments to friends and strangers alike. "I keep thinking about that girl," I would

begin, at any juncture in a conversation that might serve to move discussion of her out into the open. When my friends began to tease me about my obsession, I felt foolish for having trusted them. At times, one of them would point out that I'd only seen her twice. At other times, another might challenge me to ask her out. I stopped speaking about her.

But one night in the middle of dinner with my family, my father and mother at the head and foot of a short rectangular table, and my sister Julie directly across from me, I came out of a daydream about Anne Cullen in the middle of a conversation about a cousin's new baby. When I heard my mother say, "It's so strange, they just can't agree on a name for it," I said quietly, "How about Anne Cullen?"

My family chuckled; whenever I spoke, it was usually to joke, and so they assumed I'd said something funny that they hadn't quite understood. Then my father asked, "Who's Anne Cullen?"

My sister said, "I know her. She goes to Ursuline."

My eyes shot up. "You know her," I said, a statement with a hint of challenge to it.

"Sure."

I continued to stare at her, as if she were laying the groundwork of a nasty practical joke. "What do you mean?"

My sister scowled so hard that her scalp shifted downward. "What do you mean what do you mean? I know her. She goes to the Academy."

How could I not have put two such simple facts together, that my sister went to the very same school that Anne Cullen did? The fact sharpened the fading image of Anne Cullen that I had been trying to preserve in mind. Someone else, someone close to me, knew of Anne. She was even more real, she went to school in a certain place, and she said and did things heard and witnessed by others.

My sister asked, "So how do you know her?"

I dropped my eyes. My secret life had been flushed into the open, an event that promised both frightening and exhilarating prospects. I lifted food from my plate with my fork, but remembered not to put it into my mouth until I'd spoken. "I met her at one of our basketball games."

"Oh, that's right! She's one of Vianney's cheerleaders."

I lowered my face closer to my plate, hiding in the open. But my mother, to my right, asked quietly, "Is this someone you're interested in, honey?"

I both did and did not want to continue this conversation. It would reveal my utter helplessness and awkwardness in the face of my feelings for the young woman, but I hungered for the kinds of knowledge that my other family members possessed. Just the term "interested in," which my mother had just used, struck me with its appropriateness, its handiness. I didn't have to say to others that I was "in love" with Anne Cullen, which would throw me open to jokes or prying questions; I could remark that I was simply "interested in" her, and thus be able to talk about her without revealing too much about my dizzying feelings. I craved to know more of the vocabulary of love.

My sister, who wielded a heavier hand than my mother did, said, "So you gonna ask her out?"

Mechanically, I kept on eating. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe a movie..."

"She's a senior. You'll have to take her to dinner."

This statement struck me like a blow. A vast, confusing scenario opened before me. I saw myself in the company of Anne Cullen in a large restaurant. She was not dressed in her cheerleader's outfit, but in a dress, a long expensive one, and I had to pull out the chair for her and then maneuver it and her up to the table. Could I accomplish that, smoothly, without jerking her? If the chair didn't slide easily, was I supposed to shove it with my hip? But first, where would I park the car? But even before that, where would I get a car?

No one said anything further on the subject. They had probably noticed how I'd lowered my heated face ever closer to my plate. Conversation turned briefly to my rising grades, but I knew that such remarks were just a ploy, overused by this point, to bring me back to the land of the speaking. Dutifully, I complied by volunteering vague plans about a course or two. Mostly, I just finished the meal, and without tasting the food. Anne Cullen had skittered out of my reach forever.

That was what I felt, but my heart ached for a reprise, a crack in the dark wall of fate that separated me from her--a desirable object that I did not possess the skills to acquire. Later, I sat among my family in the family room, the four of us arranged before the TV set. I did not really understand what was happening on the screen, though occasionally one of the others would make a remark or laugh or make some sort of sound. Though I did not realize it, I was waiting for someone to say something like, "When you want to take a young lady out to dinner, the first thing you do is..." Eventually, when this unconscious need remained unsatisfied, I broke the spell of the TV watching and went off to be alone in my room.

Weeks passed. I suffered the loss of Anne Cullen in silence. Then one evening my sister found me on the back porch, reading, as I nearly always was, and said, "I talked to Anne today. She says she'd like to go out with you."

The page went white before my eyes. A few seconds later, my vision cleared to reveal my sister still standing before me. She still held her school books at this late hour, because, I remembered, she was always involved with something after school.

I said, "No." But within me, the black wall between me and Anne Cullen revealed the tiniest of fissures. A sliver of bright light passed through it.

"I'm telling you the truth. I tease her in the hallway all the time. 'Watch out! He's comin' to get you. He's comin' to get you'!"

She laughed and walked off. The bright fissure in the wall went dark. The knowledge that Anne was now fully aware of my secret longing for her would render me totally mindless and awkward in her presence.

At school among my friends I stopped talking about Anne. Shy eggheads like me, they seemed to be waiting for me to make some kind of move. Evidently, none of them could guess that the source of my keenest frustration was their common assumption that I could, if I just wanted to, ask Anne Cullen out on a date. That I didn't have any idea as to how to go about such an undertaking occurred to no one. In time, this latest swell of energy passed on without effect as I remained helplessly inactive and increasingly quiet. Friends and family alike dropped the subject of Anne Cullen.

I did not go to any more games during basketball season, and then when the football season started I decided to boycott those games too because I'd learned, by asking an innocent-seeming question at a safe moment, that the Academy cheerleaders served at them as well. All the while, I was keenly aware of the existence of Anne Cullen, and even imagined that I could track the path of her days. When I sat in class, I realized that she too sat in a classroom, just across town. And though I was not a sportsminded person, I knew which Saturdays enclosed one of my school's football games and where she would be performing the curious duties of an imported cheerleader. In fact, at my desk or before a book, I would be aware of the time--the time the game started, and the time it ended, and most of the minutes in between. During those moments, I was often visited by vivid images of Anne Cullen on the field, lifting her arms and knees, jumping, bouncing about in her bulky white sweater and maroon skirt. On days that it snowed, I saw snow falling about her, spangling her dark hair. I even provided her chilly image with earmuffs.

When courage infused me briefly one afternoon, I hazarded a question to my sister. "Do you know what Anne Cullen plans to do after she graduates?"

"Anne? I think she wants to become a nun."

This new knowledge had an effect on me that I would never have guessed. My very first thought was, "That girl always surprises me." That she had spoken with me and laughed at my jokes at that first game, had sought my eye in the next game and smiled when our eyes had met, had said (if my sister could be trusted)

that she wanted to go out with me--all of these things had been surprises. And now of all the things she wanted to go off and become a nun?

She was unfathomable, a mystery, compelling in her unknowability. But now I knew that she wanted to be known. In an instant, she had become more real, more of a flesh-and-blood person that I'd imagined before. I could not for a minute believe that the young woman whose healthy body regularly leapt like a graceful panther before the eyes of a cheering crowd truly wished to hide away that same healthy body in a musty convent. Those pink lungs craved to breathe, those legs ached to run, those lips longed to press to other lips. Now when I imagined her at the football games, I invested her figure with other remembered details; she was the quietest of the cheerleaders, her voice a vibrating reed among their strident yelps; her smile was a flutter, rarely a grin; and her eyes, they kept moving over the crowd. They rarely rested for long on the eyes of another, but they had on mine.

If Anne Cullen was going to become a nun, it was not because she didn't want to be held and kissed, it was because she was despairing of finding love. I was sure of that.

I must ask her out. It was my duty to do so. I must show her that her kind glances deserved to be returned, that her sensitive curiosity deserved to be appeased. She was a girl putting out the message that she would like to try love, and some boy somewhere must come forward.

Against my better judgement, I broached the fact to my mother that I was thinking about asking Anne Cullen out. "But I'm not sure if she even remembers me anymore."

"Oh, I'm sure she does."

I went forward with the conversation, though my poor mother's pat positivism would soon grind me down. Couldn't she say something more truthful and less designed to please me, like "If she doesn't remember you at first, she..." What? I didn't know what the correct responses to my questions were, but I knew when I was hearing an incorrect one.

I grew surly. "So, why would she remember me?"

"She'll remember you."

And now my mother was smiling beatifically at me, like I was beautiful with blonde curls and had no acne and weighed one-hundred-and-seventy-five pounds and played on the football team. For her sake, I pretended to go on talking, just to let her feel she was of use. Cleverly, I asked her to tell me again how she and my father had met, in the hope of using their experience as a model while getting her to talk about something else.

My mother's expression grew even dreamier. "He just appeared at my side at a USO dance. My girlfriends and I volunteered, we were called Donut Dollies. He asked me to dance and we won the jitterbug contest."

I could not imagine ever being a guy who could suavely step up to a girl and ask her to dance or ask her out or even ask her what time it was. Nor could I imagine her reacting with delighted surprise. Still, nothing at all would happen with Anne and me if I did not ask her out.

My spirits flew high, though falteringly, on the updrafts of my resolve, but then fate swatted me from the air again. Before I could plan, before I had readied myself to speak with her, I accidentally encountered Anne Cullen again. My sister was acting in a play produced at the Academy, and one Sunday afternoon my mother and my sister and I drove out to see the performance. Because we arrived early so that my sister could go back stage and get ready, we found a parking space right near the glass doors of the small theatre. When I looked up from my seat in the back of the car, I saw Anne Cullen standing on the other side of those glass doors. She was looking directly at me.

My eyes could not take flight because she looked so different from the way I remembered that I was transfixed. Over the many weeks, my imagination had elevated her to the point of the apparitional, but it was a shock in this real moment to discover that she actually approached that level, though in an unanticipated form. She wore a long dress of dark purple, and her hair had been woven into a plaited

pile atop her head. With her hair up, her pale throat and ears were exposed, and her brown eyes seemed larger and brighter than before. She stood by the door with programs in her hand, performing the function of an usher it appeared. I took in her whole figure in one intense instant before I forced myself to drop my eyes.

I did not, could not, look at her as my family moved towards the door. I prayed that my sister would not say anything about Anne Cullen, but of course she cried, "Oh, look, Carey, it's Anne!"

"Don't," I hissed, then by millimeters moved away from her and into the sparse cover of another group of people. By the time we got to the doors, I'd maneuvered to the farther edge of the frame so that I could slide through on the other side of my mother and then open up more precious inches of distance from the shining figure of Anne Cullen who pressed into the periphery of my vision as soft conjoined shapes of mauve and brown and white. In my agony, I felt my hands seek and miss the sanctuary of my sports coat pockets. Consciously, I moved one weighted foot before the other, aware of the ridiculous slinking figure I cut, my neck craning forwards into free space, a stick that stuck out from my loose shirt collar and attached to a head whose every blemish shone like a drop of blood.

I found my seat and sunk into it under the weight of vast inward shame. Long minutes passed, and then before me the play, a musical, opened and exploded in garish blasts of howling song and tinny instrumental support. At times, when the action simmered down, and the leads would intertwine in various ways as they sang into each other's faces, I would think of Anne Cullen in the back and excoriate myself for my cowardice.

Minutes passed and gradually I felt that I would be safe now by continually staring forward and, at the end, moving to distant exit. But at the intermission, my mother patted my hand and announced, "I'm going to go back there and talk with her," and then leapt up and strode off before I could react.

My heart fell yet another foot. It seemed that nothing could derail the train of fate. I sat and faced the emptied stage in my separate cone of silence while my

mother drove one more nail into the coffin lid of my failed love. I closed my eyes; I could just imagine what she was saying back there.

"You're Anne, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. You're Carey and Julie's mother. I saw you all come in."

Nods, smiles, complicitous trusting demeanors.

"I'm afraid my son, who is head over heels in love with you, is just too darned shy to talk to you."

"I noticed that. Do you think I'll ever get the courage to ask me for a date?"

A mother's wink, a knowing smile. Perhaps a pat on the girl's wrist.

"We're workin' on him. He might just come around yet."

"I hope so. I can't wait forever. If he doesn't ask me out soon, I'm going to go ahead with my plans to join a convent."

I snapped to when my mother reappeared beside me. "Why?" I hissed.

She did not seem to have heard me. "She's delightful," she whispered dramatically.

I could have told her that. What had she possibly hoped to accomplish? She had simply further validated my inadequacy. Though I wanted to scream at her, I said nothing. At this very moment, Anne Cullen might be watching for my reaction to my mother's return. I was pressed into a very tight corner: to appear uninterested would be hurtful; to appear eager would be weak; to appear interested would reestablish my cowardice.

At the end of the play, I buried myself in the crowd heading for a far exit and willed my consciousness blank until I felt outside air.

For the next few weeks I slowly recovered, though the incident had nearly killed me. In fact, I had not wanted to live for the first week afterwards. Then I received the news that I'd been accepted at a college in California, one located thousands of miles away from the scene of my terrible failures with Anne Cullen.

My spirit immersed itself in the prospect of a new life. My academic record had only improved, bolstered by the intensity of my monastic escape into knowledge and books and the equally intense desire to meet the soaring standards implicitly imposed by Anne Cullen's mere existence. The unexpected bestowal of a couple of academic awards pushed my self-confidence up another notch. The football season had been extended by playoffs; when my friends proposed that they attend the final game as a group, I accepted.

It was early spring and a steady drizzle set in by noon. The game was played on a pocked, public field encircled by a running track. Most of the fans arrived in ponchos or Macintoshes, but I, a slightly more bohemian me emboldened by the reflective glamour of a college acceptance, had dressed in a long black raincoat and brought a wide black umbrella.

Anne Cullen was there. If I'd expected to find myself more fortified against the girl's charms, I had been deceived. From my seat mid-way up the steep bleachers, I could not take my eyes off her. It only added to my sadness that her eyes did not search for mine. While she performed her precise routines, she kept her eyes forward and her smile more fixed than before; and when a cheer was completed, she trotted quickly back to the bench with the other young women to huddle under shared ponchos abandoned by the players on the field.

Late in the game, the drizzling rain thickened, and I noticed that she and another cheerleader had been caught off to one side without protection. The two of them stood and talked, but I could see from the way they hunched together that they were chilled. The game was in the final quarter and everyone was standing to keep just a bit dryer. I closed my umbrella and leaned to a guy in the row before me. "Could you pass this down to the cheerleaders?" I said. He seemed surprised but did accept the umbrella and did succeed in getting a person in front of him to pass the umbrella forward.

As I watched, the umbrella impossibly made its way down another dozen benches and then into the hands of a kid walking along the wide running track and

then across the track to the bench where the cheerleaders huddled, and then, remarkably, into the hands of a surprised Anne Cullen.

I could see the boy talking to Anne, see her tentatively take the umbrella, see the boy vaguely point at the crowd behind him before he moved off. In the next instant Anne Cullen's eyes flitted hurriedly over the crowd and immediately found mine. Across the long distance of one hundred feet, she smiled. In fact, her cheeks flushed, flushed so deeply that I could see their color from where I stood with my wet hair plastered against my skull. I smiled back weakly, helplessly, happily, a spasm of laughter bubbling just below my throat, and then the umbrella snapped open and Anne Cullen and her nearest friend disappeared beneath it.

Hunched in the drizzle, I swabbed the wetness from my brow as I waited out the game. Once I idly plied a comb through my wet hair. I glanced down at Anne Cullen, saw her watching, saw her lean to another and her smiling mouth make the words, "Look, he's combing his hair."

When the game ended, I found that the umbrella was making its way back to me. It moved along, hand over hand, then stalled and I stepped down a few rows to claim it. Later, I stood beneath it on the track before the emptying stands in the company of my friends. Three went off in a group to one car, and I talked on with two others. Then only Marty Wills was left, and we shared a long interchange of threats to race borrowed family cars over the weekend. Then Marty's older sister came by and scooped him up, and a moment later I turned to discover with a shock that Anne Cullen was standing beside me under my umbrella.

I stared, quieted. She was not turned towards me, but although I could not see her face, I knew instantly that it was she. The uniform, the imprinted shape of her head, the heavy bale of hair. The discovery absolutely stopped my breathing, I had never been so close to her. Her left shoulder was not six inches from my right hand, wrapped around the umbrella handle. The pure physical reality of her, imposed by her nearness, was unbearable. She was shorter than I, by a head in fact, a surprising discovery. I could see the individual strands of hair that made up the

wonderful mass of dark waves that covered her head, the impressive breadth and straightness of her shoulders, the symmetry of her shoulder blades beneath the sweater. I sensed the warm moist heat that radiated from her body.

And then I looked away. When many moments later I finally regained the composure to turn my head again, I saw that she had walked off and joined the departing cheerleaders. I had failed to speak to her, as her visit had invited me to do, and so she had left my side. I hurried away to my car, stricken, and road home alone within the palpable isolation of its metal interior. I never saw Anne Cullen again.

Those are the facts: I did not speak to her under the umbrella, and I never saw her again. The facts are sad, potentially embittering, perhaps tragic. We are invited to conclude, therefore, that this is a tragic story, a chronicle of cowardice that surely constitutes the first stuttering steps of a whole life of failure. But given the full resiliency of human hearts and their tenacity for attempting to love, such conclusions might be too hastily reached. Lives are lived over time, and they span failures and successes alike. We could safely say, however, that for thirty years few words involving the girl under the umbrella were of any comfort to me.

But when I think of Anne Cullen now, on the other side of several decades, my regret is no longer so biting. I realize that the whole matter was more complex than a simple case of opportunity missed. Of course, I will always wish that I'd been stronger earlier in my life, from as close to the womb as possible, but I no longer wish that I had pulled Anne Cullen into my arms, as I'd wished I'd done so many times after the moment when she'd walked away from under my umbrella. In fact, I am glad I did not, because I know now that I could not have made her happy. I was to learn that my unhealed anger could darken even the sunniest vistas; eventually, the gloom imposed by my own unformed and embittered self would have sundered any union that Anne and I could have effected.

A day actually arrived when I felt grateful that I was spared the certain prospect of my inflicting on Anne Cullen the deeper kinds of pain we experience

when love blooms too soon and then, in terrible stages, dies. No, I had given her as much love as I'd been able to, and that love is hers to keep and remember, if she chooses to. A girl of such grace and courage deserved a better boy than I was then. I'd like to think that she would approve of the man I am now, after decades of effort to earn the love of a remarkable woman like Anne Cullen.

And oh, I'm sure you're wondering: Did she ever become a nun? She did indeed! So there's the added wrinkle that I probably could never have measured up to the competition.

END