

THE SHAPE-CHANGER, Part I

By Michael Ventura

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There was a night when I was a boy – I was nearing my eighth birthday, it was 1953, and terrible things had been happening all day, all week, all year. I'll begin with the year.

Ethel and Julius Rosenberg either had been or were about to be executed. It was very vague to me. The grown-ups spoke of them as though they had already been dead a long time. I did not understand “dead” very well, but the way the grown-ups spoke it must be terrible. The Rosenbergs had been convicted of treason (technically espionage), on evidence people still argue about, but they weren't dying for that. They were dying to signal all Americans that if you called yourself “communist” or “radical,” this was the price.

My parents were two of the Americans who were meant to get the message. “A revolutionist,” my mother called herself. Clelia and Mike, my mother and father, hadn't known the Rosenbergs personally, but the two couples had crossed paths. They had all been students at City College of New York during the same years in the 1930s, and Papa today believes that the young intellectual who talked to him so forcefully one night, trying to correct the error of his Marxism, was Julius Rosenberg. He's sure that he and Mama signed petitions handed them by Ethel and Julius, for the young Rosenbergs were activists who were always trying to get petitions signed, and the young Venturas were activists who were always signing positions.

After college their lives loosely paralleled the Rosenbergs'. Involvement with the Communist Party. Many meetings. “Activities,” as my mother called them. She was much deeper into the party than my father, didn't tell him everything, and even when close to death wouldn't tell me. “Party secrets are Party secrets” was all she'd say – and she'd say it with enormous satisfaction. (But she couldn't help adding, with her Sicilian arrogance, “I was *good* at what I did. There weren't many like me.” Leaving me to wonder, as I will always wonder, just what “what I did” might mean.)

By 1953 the witch-hunts of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had been going on for six years. Pause at that a moment. *Six years*. Of blacklists, arrests, suspension of rights – terror for thousands. Popular history remembers a few actors, writers and such who were troubled by HUAC, but forgets the thousands of teachers, shopkeepers, office workers, laborers, most of them guilty of nothing more than knowing people who *might* be guilty (as defined by HUAC). It is important to recall that, not long ago in America, who you were friends with, who you went to dinner with, who you'd worked beside – these were sufficient grounds for the government to deprive you of your livelihood.

The Communist Party had been declared illegal and driven underground. My parents weren't afraid merely of being blacklisted; they were afraid of being arrested. Their activities were defined as “treason” by the government of their time. Congress had passed a bill (proposed by Hubert Humphrey) to build concentration camps for people like my parents and their families. (Me!) *Five of the camps had been built*. The fate of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg left radicals terrified. Yet many, like my parents didn't quit their “activities”.

These were not freewheeling bohemians. This was a working class couple with four small children. (I, a 7-year old, was the eldest.) From my vantage now – 10 years older than my father was then, 12 years older than my mother – I marvel at their courage, and the desperation they endured.

Who were they but two common people, working hard for little money, carrying the weight of their own gruesome childhoods and, as in many marriages, becoming strangers to each other – like many who aren't seen by their government as treasonous? The media present radicals as fanatical, single-minded people who don't have lives like others – like the characters in *Reds*. Newspapers like mine often compound this, focusing (when they focus) on the flashier, noisier, trendier, young radical types. You don't see many stories about radicals (regular people, not leaders who at least have the luxury of being thought of as heroic) trying to raise four children.

Thank you, Papa. Thank you, Mama. You taught me how contemptible it is to play it safe. You risked everything. And you lost. But the lesson wasn't in the cruelty of the loss; it was in the dignity of the risk.

Something else happened that year, the impact of which is hard to understand 40 years later. Stalin died. You and I know Stalin to be one of the monsters of this century. So we are told, and – unlike most things we are told – it's the truth. But American Communists of 1953 *believed* in Stalin.

How could that be? Well, they knew that the American press lied about almost everything. The press called this a free country while HUAC terrorized with impunity, racism was supported by law and no woman held power anywhere. The press called this a prosperous country when, as these radicals knew and as most Americans still don't, nearly a third were in poverty (yes, in 1953). The press called this a peaceful, law-abiding country even though we had waged undeclared (and largely unreported) wars all century and even though roughly 4,000 black men had been lynched since the turn of the century. (That averages one about every five days.) It just didn't make sense for an intelligent person to believe anything the press said about Stalin – or about anything else.

So Clelia and Mike, my parents, were Stalinists. Especially Clelia. Like millions all around the world, she believed Stalin to be essentially strong, wise and good – the only one capable of standing up to the hypocrisy of the West. There were many radicals who weren't Stalinists (especially in Europe), and the left argued constantly about him – *but*, and this can't be overemphasized, all the data they could argue about was questionable, and they knew it. They had nothing but the lying mainstream press and the equally deceitful leftist press. Accurate histories hadn't been written. So there were intelligent people, like my mother, who chose to depend on Stalin.

His death in 1953 made many feel that their strongest ally was gone. Quite a feeling when you're as besieged as the American Communists of that day. But then, following his death, came revelations that could no longer be denied because they were coming from the Soviet Union itself, first in dribbles, then in torrents: the knowledge of Stalin's monstrosities. It was too much for many – the double blow first of his death and then the death of their illusions. To have been following the leadership of people who had taken orders from Stalin, and to have done this in spite of great hardship for a long time, and then to discover that your idealism and bravery had been used and betrayed by some of the worst elements in the world (and that, about this at least, your enemies were *right*) – it was too much for lots of people. It became almost a cliché among radicals in America

and Europe in 1953 and '54, how many experienced, during that time, their first nervous breakdowns.

Clelia was one of them. Not that Clelia's was – what? a purely “political” breakdown. The woman had been mad for many years in many ways, and, God knows, for many reasons. (I've written elsewhere of the variety of her madness.) But to have what she'd fought for, for so long, the part of her life she was proudest of, to have that snap and be destroyed and found unworthy – this broke her. My friend Steve Erickson has written, “I would rather know, when I die, that faith betrayed me rather than that I had betrayed it.” That was the pride she kept. But belief and purpose – they cracked. And, with them, all her fragilities cracked into a darkness from which she never fully emerged again.

And my father, like any man, had his own demons. Surely Mike's childhood had been as terrible as Clelia's. And now he felt that even his love had failed. It had not saved his life, nor had it cured his woman. He was 37, with four small children and little money, and the woman he believed to be stronger than anyone he knew – she was under restraint in a mental hospital, suffering in ways he could not imagine, and where she might start to babble something that could result in his arrest.

I had never seen him weeping until that night, when he sought what relief might be found in tears. Did he find relief in finally being beaten? Perhaps. But let's be clear: psychological jargon aside, being beaten does not mean you are a “victim”; it means, at the very least, that you fought. Now, at last, it was evident that saving the world was not going to be his fight anymore.

Many thousands of men and women in this century, from Russia to Spain, from Germany to Chile, from the United States to China, have sat in situations very like my father's, finally allowing themselves such weeping, for such reasons. This is, in other words, a moment in history. (And no, it is not an unusual sight in any century, a parent weeping, a child amazed and appalled at the sounds. How many thousands of children have sat like I did and, and are sitting that way now as I write, with one of their parents taken not so much by people as by a macabre coupling of psychology and history? I greet you, my brothers and sisters. You share my pride at how hard we are to kill.)

As for my mother – the mad trade one kind of secret for another, and one sort of history for another. But that's another story. At this point, in this one, my father sits in his sister's kitchen on DeKalb Avenue in Brooklyn with his head in his hands, weeping, making horrible sounds.

And a boy of 7, me, sits across the room, watching him – a boy who knows nothing of what I've said here, knows only that his mother had raved and had done things and they'd come and they'd taken her, and they hadn't been gentle about it. That boy, like so many girls and boys, looks at his father and cannot help but think: *You could not protect our mother*. An awful and unjust thought, but justice is not the business of children.

Let's leave them there for now – a father and son unable to guess in any way the decades it would take to understand.

Continued in Part II

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THE SHAPE CHANGER, Part II

By Michael Ventura

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There was a night when I was a boy – 7 years old, in my Aunt Anna’s kitchen on DeKalb Avenue in Brooklyn, watching my father weeping with his head in his hands. I tried two weeks ago to tell why he was weeping, and why even this unknown man’s weeping is part of history; now I’ll try to tell what his weeping had to do with me and God. Psychology and education theory have for the most part avoided how earnestly many children ponder God, and how secretly, and how it shapes them. Fortunately, we don’t have to depend on theorists. We can tell each other our stories and see what happens.

In that kitchen I had, as I’ve said, the unjust thought that if my father could not protect my mother from being taken to a “mental hospital” (strange words, to a child), then he couldn’t protect me. I could not know then that protection is not a human possibility, and never has been.

I could not know that if I had been born richer my father wouldn’t have been able to protect me from insularity. If I’d been born female no one could have protected me from the self-doubt inflicted on females from birth. If I’d been born black I wouldn’t have been protected from hatred, just as being born white did not protect me from hating. Since I was born male, nothing could protect me from the feeling that I had to be a hero or else I was worthless. Nor could anyone be protected from the lies called “education” and the fears called “religion.”

To be born at all, it seems, meant that as with all children some part of me would never wholly forgive my parents (who had also not been protected) for failing to protect me. And this burden of not being able to forgive – not to forgive one’s own people, which is not to forgive one’s own life – is also something almost no one can be protected from. At least not until they look harder into their own story.

So, as so many children have, I watched the only chance I had in the world crying with his head in his hands. I remember searching for something to offer him. After all, he was crying, I was not. My aunt was frantic, I was not. I was, in fact, the calmest person in the room. Which was why no one noticed me. (In my family, calm has never been rewarded – it’s the craziest who get the attention on any given day.) It never occurred to anyone that such a self-contained child was perhaps containing more than was safe for him and could use some help. As for me, ever the child-priest, I felt it was my function to give help, not get it.

I went to my father, stood before him, and said, “Don’t cry, Daddy. God will help us.” He looked up from his hands with a face I had never seen, a face I didn’t know existed in the world. He said, “What God? There is no God.”

I was shocked beyond response. I just walked away. Shocked not because I believed him, but shocked that my father could be so *wrong*. It was one thing for grown-ups to be helpless and crazy. It was quite another for them to be wrong. It meant that I was alone. Completely. On my own.

I think this is one moment in childhood that the theorists have not sufficiently studied: the moment when the child feels, more deeply than can be described, that the

parents are dangerously wrong about something essential to the child's life. To couch this moment in Freudian, Jungian, gender or even family-therapy vocabularies is to rob this moment of its starkness. For it is often the starkest moment of a child's life. It shapes the child as deeply as the flashier traumas psychology prefers to emphasize. It can be the moment when a child decides, on the most fundamental level, not to be his father, not to be her mother. And from that point, everything changes.

Such a statement as my father's was in no way abusive – not among Sicilians, where wailing and cursing and breaking the breakables are part of our culture. (Sicilians consider WASP reticence abusive.) He had every right to cry out against God, and every right to do so in front of his child. What are we on the planet for but to be with each other, young and old, in such moments? I know many self-help and child-rearing books foster the dogma that such responses must be controlled (suppressed) before children. I offer this: if he had cried out in silence, I *still* would have heard. My soul would have heard his, but it would not have been clear, and I would have been even more frightened. I am glad, when my father cried out against God, that I was there to see and hear it.

But it cost me. I decided, for one, never to cry. Not because it was unmanly. My father is still one of the men I most admire *as* a man. No, it was because after that night, and until fairly recently, I felt that to cry was to flinch before God. And I felt from that night on, for a long time, that God and I were in some sort of staring contest in which I must not flinch or blink. It was a wasteful thought, but sometimes such wastefulness makes you look strong to the world, which feeds your illusion of where your strength comes from, so you persist in it.

The world, of course, does not know *why* you seem strong in the odd way you do. What concerned friend would guess that you're trying to stare down God? Especially when you yourself have forgotten, except on the most profound level, that that's why you rarely flinch and are ashamed to cry. And the women you have failed to love – women who loved you, in part, precisely because they sensed this contest in you – did they know that you were trying to find strength in their beauty, their souls, because you had unfinished business with God?

If the word *God* puts you off, think of it as merely a terminology, a metaphor, a kind of technical word: the most provocative single word to indicate life's incredible and inexhaustible capacity to surprise and overwhelm. *That* is what I, as a very small child, began trying to stare into. Calling it God evokes the sense one gets that sometimes life's capacity to overwhelm seems to act upon us personally, as though with a purpose. (Yes, a sense of purpose may simply be life's little joke on us. And yet – if life has enough purpose to joke, then it may have enough to do other things, don't you think?)

I took, quite literally, to staring. This would go on until, at the age of 24, I left New York for good. I had a rule: if my eyes met another's eyes, then no matter who they were – big, tough, black, brown, white, male, female – they had to look away first. On pain of death I wouldn't look away. I was quite crazy with this. Took fantastic chances. Every day, especially on the subway, I dared God, dared life, to overwhelm me. I stared down all comers.

I couldn't do that now. I'm just not that obsessive anymore, and I'd like to live a little longer. But the truth is that, in those years, only two people stared me down. Both were old African-American women. Both times our eyes met on the subway. At some point each understood what I was doing and what the stakes were – I swear – and drew on resources I couldn't imagine, and hit me with stares as forceful as blows. They, too, I

felt, were staring down God when they looked at the world, only they had been doing it longer.

Why did my father's words have such an impact? Because for my father to reject God, meant to me, that on some level, God had rejected my father. *Not* my mother, oddly, though she was in more trouble. A good Catholic, I knew that trouble, even terrible trouble did not mean God had deserted you; in fact, by all accounts, God *liked* trouble. Positively reveled in it, made it His business to get us into trouble. (I had, of course, the silly notion then, that God had a gender.) Trouble was God's turf. If you were in trouble, then, almost by definition, you had the opportunity to be close to God.

My father's negation was very different. And, as I say, it meant for me not that Papa had rejected God, but that, in order for him to say, "There is no God" with such absolute conviction, in order for him to be so wrong –this *had* to mean that God had rejected him. God had pushed him to a state beyond contact, and he wasn't strong enough to return to contact on his own. I saw this without understanding, but my feeling slowly became clear: as far as I was concerned, God had rejected my whole family. For He wasn't going to get away with rejecting one of us. We're Sicilians: all or nothing.

It also never occurred to me that God might help me alone. It was my family, all of us, or no one. I didn't want help on any other terms. It took many years to accept in my heart (though I accepted it readily, if often ungratefully, in my life) help that came to me alone and not to them. I did not, as is probably evident, stop believing in God, no matter my feeling. (God returned this favor and did not stop believing in me.) I simply became furious at God, and remained furious for decades. Fuck with my father? Then don't look to *me*, God. No prayers from me. And no goodness, if I could help it. No retreat, no surrender. (I suspect the Catholic religion lost a budding priest because of this conflict. If this is true, my father's outburst was a gift to me indeed; I would have made the worst kind of tortured priest.)

A 37 year-old father and 7 year-old son in a kitchen, on a terrible day. No protection anywhere in sight. And then six words: "What God? There is no God." The strange thing is that my little boy's "Don't worry, Daddy, God will help us" had little of God in it. It was a child's attempt at comforting. But my father's anguished rage at God, culminating in his utter rejection: this was *full* of God. This shot God into me as nothing ever had. For it made me respond in my heart: "You are wrong, Papa." And that moment was when my own dialogue with God began. When, some would say, my life began.

It is not easy to know what is happening in any given kitchen. It is not easy to see, at least right off, the blessing and the curse (they always come together) that a father's pain can bestow upon a son. But let's leave them there for now.

Continued in Part III

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THE SHAPE-CHANGER, Part III

By Michael Ventura

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There was a night when I was a boy – in my aunt’s kitchen I watched my father weep over the crackup of my mother and the dissolution of their dreams. At the age of 7, I felt the full weight of what had happened. For 7-year olds (and 9 year-olds and 14-year olds) *can* feel such things, and we must remember this when we look at children. Such a feeling in a child blocks out all others, like a seizure, and leaves the child dazed and alone in a way that is as awakening as it is frightening.

Therapists talk about “issues of abandonment.” Many would say that I was abandoned, in different ways, by both parents that night. But the word *abandonment* frames the experience solely in the negative. This is a profound mistake. Such moments do cast a child into a stunning aloneness, but in that place he is often suddenly more himself, she is suddenly more herself – in fact, this is often when you discover that you *have* a self, a soul, a life that is all yours and very different from what you share with others. If the moment is too extreme, you may never really connect with anybody again, but if such a moment fails to happen at all, you may never deeply connect with yourself. It’s a risky life either way.

Often we try to interpret such a moment in terms of love – whether or not we’re loved and how much – but I suspect love has very little to do with it. If love were sufficient to decipher family and childhood, then surely we wouldn’t have had to wait centuries for the current crop of theorists to explain it to us. That night in that kitchen changed many things, but it didn’t change anybody’s love. I loved my father then as now: his gentleness and his rage, his intelligence and his bafflement, his endurance and his despair, his abilities and his inabilities, his appearances and disappearances – and his constant, tender love for me, for *my* gentleness, rage, intelligence, bafflement, endurance, despair, abilities, inabilities, appearances, disappearances.

I remember a day not long after that night, when I took a bad gash to the head and was rushed to the emergency room. They laid me on an operating table and began to stitch, with nothing to kill the pain. Papa stood right behind me and held my head in his hands as the doctor worked the needle through my skin. I remember the pressure and warmth of Papa’s workman’s hands and how he tried to absorb through his palms and fingers the pain of the needle. I was not alone in the world *that* day, and the scar on my forehead is a mark of what binds us.

Yet the fact was: whatever our love, my father was never really going to leave that kitchen. In a sense, the rest of his life would take place there, lived in shadows cast by those events. But though he couldn’t leave, I had to. So this was the night we began to go our separate ways.

Papa was formed, a man, 37 years old, with a way of walking, a way of speaking, a way of thought, a manner – a style, if you like, to fall back on. I had none of that. A child changes every day, grows in and out of manners, thoughts, styles. A girl has no idea what kind of body she’s going to have – breasts like her mother’s, or like some ancestor’s whom everyone’s forgotten. A boy of 7 must wait another seven years or so to hear his man-voice – a voice no one can anticipate. A child’s face at 7 will be another face at 11 and another at 17. A child is a shape-changer.

Tribal legends speak of shape-changers – witches who become coyotes, become tigers, change genders, change sizes. Children partake of this magic. They become and become and become. It's impossible to guess the character (or lack of it) your child will one day have. I find this a momentous fact. Enormous. The extent to which such knowledge is impossible . . . is the measure of how little we comprehend the hidden forces of growth.

I give you, then, a 7-year old boy. A shape-changer. My mother will be too crazy to help me survive. I will have to help her, in fact. My father, unable to leave that kitchen, won't know what I have to learn. And my country, far from being a help, will be at best an obstacle.

Which is true of any child forced into an educational system designed to destroy originality. But my relationship to my country was aggravated by my parents' being (Mama's word) "revolutionists," both threatening and threatened by their country. Though they never spoke of this around me, it had somehow seeped in. A few days later my father said, "Do you know where your mother is?" "Yes," I said, "she's in a concentration camp."

My father turned a color I had never seen before and have never seen again: a yellow-green gray. "You must never say that. She's in a *mental hospital*." I was a bright kid; maybe I had associated "mental" with "concentration," so you could see it simply as a mistake, but my father's face told me that he wasn't very certain of the difference either.

Children of radicals everywhere will witness with me that, long before you can articulate why, you will understand in your knees that if your country is willing to behave brutally toward your parents, it is equally willing to behave brutally toward you. Toward anybody, in fact. If your father is *that* afraid of your government, he probably has reason to be, and his fear sends you a warning. You will never depend upon that government for anything important.

My survival, in short, had become purely my own business.

Like many children who come to this, I began to contemplate myself in that rapt, fiercely private way children have. I pondered my body first, out of some instinct that my body was all mine. It appalled me, how inept my body was. Clumsy at stoopball and stickball, worse at basketball and baseball. In a gutter world where fighting meant everything, I was just as silly as a fighter. Worst of all, I walked funny. A kind of Charlie Chaplin walk, but not agile like Chaplin – frightened, like me. A waddle, feet pointed way out, as though each step were a turn to the right or left when I was actually trying to go straight.

Many years later I would read Imamu Amiri Baraka: "A walk is as profound as a system of judging." I knew what he was talking about. My walk, as a boy, *was* a system of judging. It judged, for one thing, my capacities, and found them lacking. It invited the world's tolerance or mockery, gentleness or violence, depending on how the world was manifesting that day; its judgment was that there was nothing to do but walk this walk and take whatever the world gave. It was the walk of an animal who is not going to contest the judgment of the other animals, who merely wishes not to be bitten, and so displays that he is not a threat.

That kitchen in 1953 taught me that I could no longer afford my walk. If I continued to walk that way through the world, whatever had come after my parents would one day come after me. I may not have known the details of why those men took my mother away or why my father was crying, but this much was clear: *something* out

there wasn't kidding. Call it God or history or psychology, *something* out there meant business, and if it comes for you you'd better be – ready?

That's impossible. Let's say at least that you'd better have a little something of your own. For me, my something became the obsession that I must walk a new walk.

Children do this. Threatened children especially. One day you'll see them become preoccupied in a secret way, a way you cannot enter: they are giving attention to shape-changing. They are not simply "developing" or "reacting." They are molding themselves, making themselves up. They have a project. They couldn't tell you about it if they wanted to. You couldn't help them if you knew. They are shape-changing – making decisions at 7, at 9, at 12, that are among the most important they'll ever make, and they are making them deep down beyond societal or parental control.

It's a shocking phenomenon, when you think about it. All societies have feared it, and have in some way tried to control their children at this point. Sometimes that control is called "initiation," sometimes it's called "bar mitzvah," sometimes it's called "junior high school." Sometimes these controls work, and sometimes they don't; sometimes they're beneficial, other times they're not. No one, in these realms, can be sure – and that, too, is a shocking phenomenon when you think of it.

For me, the struggle to realize myself, to make myself real *to* myself, began as a struggle literally to walk – a spiritual struggle in physical form, its essence best described by my brother Vinnie, speaking decades later of his own effort: "Mike, I had to learn to become as dangerous as my life."

He was not implying violence in any sense. He meant that he had to find in himself, in his walk, his eyes, his voice, his thought, his heart – he had to find in himself the swift, intent, fierce forces that he saw at play around him. This does not exclude gentleness, sweetness and calm, but it does put them in a different context, in a different environment within you. If you go far enough, I think, all those qualities, from fierceness to sweetness, are there at the same time, in each act, in each word, and you can be said to have grown up.

My first step in this attempt was literally a physical step. From that night till I was 13, I watched my feet when I walked. I made them point forward, not out. When I passed a store, I watched myself in the plate-glass window. I was working, incessantly, to see in that reflection not my waddle but the walk of the cowboys in the movies, John Wayne's walk, or Randolph Scott's, or Gary Cooper's – I wanted the line of my body to say, as theirs seemed to say, "I can stand alone if I have to, and if you mess with me it's going to cost you." I wanted my walk, my stance, to protect me in a way that grown-ups clearly could not.

And I achieved such a walk. By the time I was 15, I didn't have to think about it anymore. My physical way of being in the world had transformed. I had become a master shape-changer: the street thought I was tough – weird, but tough. To my astonishment, I didn't have to fight to prove it. I just had to walk. Later on, the world believed what the street believed, and gradually I grew into my act. I can stand alone if I have to, and if you mess with me it's going to cost you.

If that were all I had grown into, it wouldn't be nearly enough, but you can only tell one story at a time. I tell this story for all the threatened children – who will witness for us if we don't witness for each other? For so many children are threatened now, and the terms in which they are spoken of have been invented largely by people who've led so-called "normal" (read "insular") lives. Many of these terms further brutalize and

threaten children by underestimating them. You cannot educate people you underestimate.

When you realize that certain street kids, with their incredible body language, have fashioned that language by dint of terrible inner effort, each and every one of them, then you realize that they are capable of anything if you can reach them. A way of walking *is* as profound as a system of judgment.

Of course, something inside me still walks the old way – waddles behind, and is protected by, the shape-changer’s walk. One of the costs of shape-changing is that when people, especially women, like or even love the stance the shape-changer created, the part of me that walks the old way doesn’t feel much included in their admiration or their love. Would they have loved the awkward walker? It’s a question without an answer. “Yes” is too easy, and “no” isn’t fair. We’ll never know for sure, they and I.

Could the awkward walker have written what I’ve written? Or is the shape-changer the writer? Or do they have a kind of exchange, and agreement between them: you express yourself here, I’ll express myself there, we’ll meet up in the last paragraph? I suspect some such arrangement. Again, I’ll probably never know.

I do know this: a boy and his father in a kitchen, on a terrible day, in a terrible year. The father weeps, the boy watches – what emphasis would be given such a scene in a film? Where do you read about such scenes? And aren’t the theorists mostly talking of other things? Yet the boy’s response to that night will *be* his life. It is the pivotal moment, decisive without being quite definable: the moment when a product of history becomes a maker of (at least) his own history, the moment when a child becomes more than a child, becomes a shape-changer.

Papa – it’s been a strange thing writing this, and knowing that you’ll read it. A strange thing to go back to that kitchen. Call me when you finish reading this one. I love that boy and that man. I’ll always see them there. Let’s leave them in the moment just before they changed.

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