

Stealing Fire

By Tobias Wolf

In June of 1961 I took a bus from Seattle to La Jolla, California, to spend the summer with my father and my older brother, Geoffrey. I was fifteen, and hadn't laid eyes on either of them since I was eight. In September I was to take up a scholarship at the Hill School, in Pennsylvania, and my brother, who had just graduated from Princeton, would leave for a teaching job at Robert College, in Istanbul. We'd have a grand summer, my father promised, catch up on the lost years and be together again, a family.

Before Geoffrey arrived I was alone with my father for almost a month. He and my mother had separated when I was four, and even before that various projects had kept him mostly away from home. I wanted to get to know him, but he didn't make it easy. During the day he was warm and funny and full of stories, but as night came on he drank and turned sour. He sat on the edge of my bed in his briefs and rehearsed old grievances while fiddling with one of his many gadgets and doodads, taking it apart, cleaning or adjusting it, putting it back together.

He loved what we would now call "accessories," as I did, and do—especially things that might be assumed to make up the contents of a gentleman's portmanteau: silver cigarette cases and hip flasks; pocket watches, with their chains and fobs; leather boxes; gold-nibbed fountain pens and crystal inkwells; compact German binoculars; seal rings; ivory figurines; fragrant briar pipes; tobacco pouches of the softest leather; silver penknives and fine lighters.

One of my father's lighters was a gold Dunhill. I developed a crush on that lighter, its stippled finish, its heft, the decisive way the lip snapped open and shut, its clean, elegant design. Growing up among Zippo users, I'd never seen one like it. I had smoked occasionally before, but now I took it up with a vengeance, mainly as an excuse to use the gold Dunhill, which I kept in my pocket when my father was at work.

Geoffrey arrived on a bus one afternoon in July. That night, my father left our apartment to visit a woman he was seeing, and didn't return. She called early the next morning to tell us that he'd had a breakdown and had been taken to a sanitarium outside San Diego.

So began our family reunion.

What to do? The obvious course for Geoffrey was to put me on a bus back to Seattle and rejoin the friends with whom he'd initially planned to spend the summer sailing the New England coast. Instead, he went to Convair Astronautics and found a job translating technical manuals into English—the same job our father had held. It took me a while to understand why he'd done this: he actually *wanted* to be my brother and to prepare me, ignorant bumpkin that I was, for the rigors of a serious school.

Geoffrey gave me books to read, and essays to write about those books. At night, he went over my essays and showed me how to rewrite them, and how to think more carefully, and boldly, about what I read. In return, I taught him the songs of Hank Williams, Ferlin Husky, Jim Reeves. We began to become friends, though he was definitely friend-in-charge. Sometimes at night we went out to a jazz club, and he let me sneak sips from his beer.

On Sunday afternoons we visited our father at the sanitarium. He was amusing about his "headshrinker" and about the "misunderstanding" that had landed him there; amusing, too, about his fellow-patients, from his presumptive eminence of sanity. He did not so much visit with us as hold court. He was expansive, liberal with advice, demanding.

He'd asked for *two* cartons of Camels. Where was his Peterson pipe? And his lighter? He wanted the gold Dunhill, not this one. We couldn't find it? Then look again!

So Geoffrey and I looked again—under the beds, behind the dresser, in the cabinets, in all the pockets of his bespoke suits, even in his shoes (this was my idea). We had to face him empty-handed once more the following Sunday, and endure his bitter disappointment and impatience. All the while the lighter was in my pocket, with my initials now engraved on the lid.

Then one night it fell out of my pocket while I slept, and Geoffrey found it. He woke me and held it before my eyes, tapping the initials. I can still see the look on his face. Without a word he turned and left for work.

He didn't have much to say to me after that. My father was released a week or so later, and as soon as he entered the apartment he gave me a fist right in the face. I was strangely grateful for it. It hurt, but nothing like the pain of spirit I saw in my brother. They put me on a bus back to Seattle, where I spent the few remaining days before leaving for school dodging my mother's questions and taking long, miserable walks.

In the summer of 1963 Geoffrey returned from Turkey, and came to Washington, D.C., to visit our mother, who'd taken a job there after I left Seattle for school. I was home, about to start my last year at Hill. I hadn't seen him for two years. We were carefully cordial. Geoffrey suggested that we take a walk down to the Mall to hear the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., give a speech. As we left our mother's building, a woman in the lobby warned us to be careful: "The monkeys are all in town."

We followed the crowds toward the Reflecting Pool. At some point I found it impossible to maintain our courteous reserve, and told Geoffrey how sorry I was for what I'd done. He stopped. "Let's talk," he said. We settled on a grassy place in the shade, and he heard me out, and then I heard him out. To my surprise, he was apologizing to *me*. For yielding to anger and moral pride, for not trying to understand, for sending me away. We talked on as people streamed past, and kept talking until we were alone there. Now and then the crowd roared, and a few emphatic words reached us from the loudspeakers, but we were too distracted to pay attention. Later, we heard that we'd missed a really good speech.

My brother and I became friends that day, and have remained so, ever closer.

Just before Christmas in my first year at Hill, my father sent me the gold Dunhill lighter and a silver cigarette case. This was a singular form of forgiveness, and also, typically, of mischief; smoking was an expellable offense at that school. Not long afterward I gave them both to friends.