

## The Trip Not Taken

My first home was a ghost town. Hidden away in a remote hollow of the Catskill Mountains, the company-owned hamlet of Chichester went bankrupt in 1939, three years before I was born. A few families, ours included, hung on for several more years. But without its once-prosperous furniture factory, which reopened a couple of times in my early boyhood only to shut down a few months later, Chichester was just another dying upstate mill town. By the time I turned five, the place was on its last legs, and looked it.

While many of my happiest memories date from those years in the Catskills—I caught my first trout in the stream behind our house when I was four, shagged foul balls for older kids at the overgrown diamond on the village green—from the fall when I entered first grade until my first year of high school, my family moved, by my count, ten times. My dad, a schoolteacher, had

itchy feet, like Pa Ingalls in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books. After leaving Chichester, we Mosheres would strike out for new territory every year or so. And although I never wanted to leave any of the towns where we temporarily alighted, I don't recall thinking there was anything unusual about pulling up stakes at the end of every school year and relocating. In those days I was a ballplaying, daydreaming, reading little guy with a slew of imaginary companions, mostly from the books I devoured—Huck Finn, *Treasure Island's* Jim Hawkins, David Copperfield. So long as our family stayed together and I could find a nearby trout brook, a ball field, and a steady supply of books to read, I didn't care how often we moved.

Still, I have always regarded Chichester as my hometown. If asked for a favorite early memory, I'd recall sitting between my dad and Reg Bennett in the front seat of Dad's old, battleship-gray DeSoto on the mountaintop behind our house, trying to dial in the Yankees–Red Sox game on the car radio. As the house lights of the town below began to wink on in the twilight, and Mel Allen or Curt Gowdy waxed poetic about the Bronx Bombers or the boys from Beantown, Reg and Dad would talk baseball. Reg—my father's best friend, fishing partner, and teaching colleague—was a second father and honorary uncle to me. In temperament, Dad and Reg were as different from each other as lifelong friends can be. My father was a big, outgoing, nonjudgmental man, comfortable with himself and others. A natural leader, he caught for the Chichester town baseball team, as he had for his high school nine. Reg was slighter in build and was several inches shorter. He was combative and, if wronged, quick to pick a fight. He pitched for the Chichester team. Over the years he had perfected a hard-breaking curve, which he could and frequently did use to brush aggressive hit-

ters back from the plate or knock them down. Like my grandfather Mosher, my father had a romantic outlook on life, which I have inherited. Reg, for his part, was a realist, with an ironical turn of mind and a dry sense of humor that I loved.

Reg loved to argue. My father did not. Sooner or later, though, Dad would be drawn into a debate, amicable enough at first, often over the relative merits of their two favorite players. Dad, a true-blue Yankee fan, was a Joe DiMaggio man. Reg was a devotee of Ted Williams. As the evening wore on and the game became heated—as Yankee–Red Sox games are wont to do—the baseball arguments between my father and uncle intensified. Soon they’d both get mad, stop addressing each other directly, and begin arguing by proxy, through me.

“Howard Frank,” my uncle said—as a boy, I was often addressed by both names to distinguish me from my father, Howard Hudson—“Howard Frank, I am here to tell you that Ted Williams is the greatest pure hitter in the history of the game.”

“Maybe so, Howard Frank,” my father shot back. “But you have my permission to inform your uncle that Joe DiMaggio is the most complete *all-around* player in the history of the game.”

I usually said nothing. For one thing, I was only four. Also, though I already had a keen appreciation for my relatives’ many eccentricities, I didn’t like arguments any more than Dad did. Fortunately, about the time full darkness settled in, we would lose the radio broadcast altogether. Then I would ask my uncle to tell me a story.

“Tell me a story” was my mantra, and Reg knew scores of good ones. Stories of the old bear hunters, ginseng gatherers, mountain guides, hermits, witches, and pioneer families who had settled Chichester. Like the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont when Phillis and I first arrived in the mid-1960s, Chichester in

the '40s and '50s was a gold mine of stories. My feisty uncle was its Homer, as well as my first storytelling mentor. Reg was working on an anecdotal history of Chichester, and sometimes he would read aloud to me from the manuscript.

Of all Reg's stories, my favorite was the one that hadn't yet happened. That was his description of the road trip he and I would take the summer I turned twenty-one. We'd start out in Robert Frost's New England, then head for New York City, where my uncle's favorite *New Yorker* writer, Joseph Mitchell, had chronicled the lives of his beloved gypsies, street preachers, and fish vendors. We'd visit the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue and Forty-first Street, with its two stone lions guarding the main entrance. Next we'd strike out for the Great Smokies, Thomas Wolfe country—my uncle loved *You Can't Go Home Again* and *Look Homeward, Angel*. We'd drop by Oxford, Mississippi, and have a gander at Faulkner's home, slope down to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's (*The Yearling*) Florida. Then we'd head for the American West—Reg, a huge fan of Zane Grey, would read me Grey's Westerns by the hour. We'd walk the streets of Raymond Chandler's LA and Dashiell Hammett's San Francisco, check out James T. Farrell's Chicago (with a side visit to the Windy City's great bookstore, Brentano's,) take a look at Hemingway's upper Michigan and Aldo Leopold's Wisconsin. We'd eat at greasy spoons and roadside custard stands, stay at motor courts and tourist cabins. Throw our fly rods and baseball gloves in the backseat and see a ball game in every town that had a team.

Our long-planned trip was no pipe dream, but my uncle and I never got to take that literary odyssey. By the time I turned twenty-one and graduated from college, Reg's wife, my aunt Elsie, wasn't well, and I'd gotten married and taken a teaching job in northern Vermont. Writing my way from book to book

and decade to decade, I set most of my own fiction in my adopted Northeast Kingdom. I turned fifty. Then sixty. Approaching my sixty-fifth birthday, with regrets for the trip not taken, I began to feel that I had to do it now or never.

Then, in the late autumn of my sixty-fifth year, came the walk to the post office that would change my life forever.



## My MacArthur Fellowship Arrives

*MacArthur Fellowships are designed for talented individuals who have shown exceptional originality and dedication in their creative pursuits.*

—GUIDELINES OF THE JOHN D. AND CATHERINE T. MACARTHUR FELLOWSHIP



In this era of instant text messaging and walk-around cell phones clamped to our ears like alien appendages, most news, good and otherwise, arrives quickly. Still, I am certain that when my MacArthur Fellowship arrives, it will do so the old-fashioned way, by U.S. mail. One morning I will set out on my regular six-days-a-week walk to the post office, and there the notification will be. Likely it will come in a cream-colored envelope constructed of the highest-grade linen. My full name will appear on the front, perhaps with an “Esquire” tacked on in deference to a soon-to-be-Fellow. The foundation’s return address will be stamped in a discreet but stately font across the sealed flap on the back.

Some years ago I heard that the MacArthur Fellowship carried a stipend of \$350,000. Recently, someone told me they’d gone up to half a mil.



“That ought to cover the gas for our cross-country trip,” I said on my way to the post office to pick up my grant that fateful fall morning.

You see, I still like to talk out loud to myself. And to the gallery of companions that my mother tells me I’ve had since I was two. I will rattle along for hours on end to relatives living and deceased, friends and adversaries, other writers, even some favorite fictional characters, like rangers Gus McCrae and Woodrow Call from *Lonesome Dove*. This morning I was conversing with my storytelling mentor, Uncle Reg, who had passed away fifteen years before.

Suddenly, an onrushing eighteen-wheeler blasted its air horn. Preoccupied by my conversation with Reg, I’d come within half a step of launching myself into the path of a log truck.

“That was close,” the postmaster said to me.

“I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You seemed to be talking to someone.”

“Yes. I was . . . practicing. For an upcoming interview.”

As I had expected—expected for the last twenty-five years, or so—here was the long-awaited cream-colored envelope. Why prolong the suspense? I tore the thing open with trembling fingers. But wait. So far from a “Dear Mr. Mosher, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation is delighted to inform you that you have been awarded . . .,” so far from a notification that if I so chose, I could spend the rest of my life crisscrossing the United States in commemoration of the trip my uncle and I never made, what I found myself scanning was a notice from my physician informing me that the prostate count from my annual bloodwork was high. Anything over 4.0 can indicate cancerous activity. “See me immediately,” she had scrawled beside the 5.9 reading.

“There it is, at long last,” said my uncle.

“There is *what?*” I said.

“Your MacArthur Fellowship,” he said. Then, “You need to have that taken care of right away, Howard Frank. Prostate cancer kills thirty thousand men a year in this country.”