

Chapter Three

Not given to bragging, Steve would never have said of himself that he was the toughest son of a bitch in the US Military; but that's what he thought. Never mind his Marine Corps basic training. Yes, he had been wide-eyed and scared at his first encounter with the screaming drill instructors, and the training was physically rigorous, but, athletic and self-assured, it left him largely unscathed. Even his year in Vietnam, though marked by moments of terror – ambushed, with fire coming from all directions, so that it seemed impossible that he was not hit; turning just in time to see the guy behind him fly in the air, after stepping on a mine that Steve had just stepped over; seeing his sergeant, just off to the right, shot in the face from close range; being surrounded by the enemy on a long range patrol, and so on – had not approached the limits of what he could bear. He had not gone home from Vietnam depressed or discouraged with the military way of life. He still loved it. He had come through the rigors of training as a Seal largely unscathed, too. In fact, when he finished the last exercise on the last day, though tired, sleepy and beaten up, his thought had been, “Well, it wasn't all that bad.” He often regarded,

with secret amusement, those soldiers who, when they spoke of their training experiences, had sad countenances and low voices, as if they had been victims of a violent crime that had left them traumatized. He recalled with a smile the Army Ranger he had met while in Vietnam, who hung his head sadly as he spoke of the rigors of his training, saying, “Those guys almost killed me.”

Yes, when his father, also a Navy-man, had said, “Congratulations, son,” with a gleam in his eye at his graduation ceremony as a Seal, Steve could see that his father had been more impressed by the accomplishment than Steve was. When his mother once mentioned his Bronze Star to acquaintances in his presence, he had only been a little embarrassed.

Steve realized he had been lucky in Vietnam – one bullet, one piece of shrapnel, will take the cockiness out of the most arrogant of men. “I could have been the one to come down in a mist of blood and tissue,” he had thought, “both legs gone, still alive, still conscious – calling for my mother.” That thought had sobered him at the time, but only momentarily. Rising quickly to the position of sergeant and squad leader – leadership came naturally to him; his men liked him – he discovered the poise and equanimity that made him an effective leader under fire and which he kept throughout his tour. He never felt the sinking encroachment of combat fatigue – the grumbling, whining and complaining, and finally the out-and-out begging to be relieved from combat or the quiet, desperate hoping for the minor wound that took one out of the field. None of that had been his lot. When he left Vietnam, he was still at the point of planning how to get the most out of his squad, how to kill the most enemy while keeping his own people alive. He would have signed up for another six months, but the Marine Corps wanted to take advantage of his leadership skills; he was sent to OCS. Then the Seal training

caught his imagination, followed by a stateside assignment he was encouraged to take and, finally, the U.S. was leaving Vietnam. So things never worked out to go back to Vietnam. It was only a small, lingering regret. He had the memories, which, in the dozen years that transpired since he had left the place, had not been burdensome, but, rather, a source of richness and pride. As far as that experience was concerned, his ready smile and the spontaneous laugh he inherited from his mother were intact and uninhibited.

“‘The toughest son of a bitch,’ indeed,” he mused, from time to time, sadly. How easily he had fallen apart. How weak he had been. It was as if he had come apart so easily because his wife at the time (Never having given marriage a lot of thought, he met Evelyn soon after Vietnam and was married in six months) had not confronted him where he was strong – where he could have taken anything – but had sidestepped all his strength and come at him where he could not absorb what was happening. “I have a lump,” she had said, sitting down next to him on the couch and taking his hand. He said the usual things, behaved in the usual way of a loving husband, then forgot about it – or stuck the thought somewhere deep in his mind. If it rattled him at all, he didn’t pay any attention. “I’m sure it will be all right,” she had said, trying to smile at him. In the back of his mind, as he went about his work and playing with the kids, he clung to those words tenaciously, harder than he would have admitted, for he was not resting easily. A week and a half later, when he was doing the dishes, she came up behind him and said this time, “It’s malignant.” He had to grip the edge of the sink to keep from collapsing. The cancer had spread. The rest was predictable. He tried throughout the ten-month ordeal to be as supportive as he could be, even as he unraveled. After months, he almost hated her for what she was doing to him. Near the end, when Evelyn was bedridden, his

mother and father came, ostensibly on vacation. His mother stayed more than a month – to the end. This, he felt sure, had kept him from falling apart completely. No man was ever more befuddled than he to find himself in his office, sitting at his desk, head in hands, door shut, crying his eyes out.

So that now, with Vietnam and the death of Evelyn behind him, it was the latter, not the former, which still pressed, like a sickening dread, on his mind. And it was the latter, not the former, that almost ruined his life, turning him, for all his love of his kids, into an embittered man, aging rapidly, tired of living. Because, through the long ordeal, he had felt so perfectly powerless, as if the emotional focus within him was beyond his control, and he would have remained thus, he thought, spinning off into a permanent, abject misery, had Beth not come into his life. That, too, was beyond his planning and remained beyond his control.

He had come to learn something of the human heart for the experience – not a realm, such as weaponry and small unit tactics, to which he had heretofore given much thought. When he was dating Evelyn something new and extraordinary happened to him. His heart became entangled with the vibrant personality of that chunky, blond-haired, ebullient sparkplug of a woman. The entanglement had nothing whatever to do with his will. It just happened as a million other things happen, willy-nilly. The burgeoning joy had grown beyond his control and then the misery, too, was beyond his control. “The toughest son of a bitch,” he mused. He had been helpless – he marveled at it now – all through that hard time, just helpless. But, since Beth came along, he was happy again; he had his spontaneous laugh back. He was humbled and sobered.

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Steve knew that Beth's relationship with her brother was not entirely happy; it was, in fact, strained. So, he wondered about this fellow he was about to meet of whom his sister spoke with such unaccustomed harshness and exasperation; even if, for all that, she spoke of him a lot.

Though prepared for some sibling friction at the airport, Steve was still a little discomforted by the awkwardness of their meeting. Beth didn't even introduce Peter to him. He had to take the lead, shaking his hand and introducing himself with an ironic laugh. And when Beth hugged her brother, Steve noticed that she averted her eyes. ("I hope he didn't notice," Steve thought, sheepishly.) And then he had to introduce the kids – Troy and Jeannie – too.

Steve could only smile ironically through the meeting, marveling that these two siblings seemed to have been seeing each other on a regular basis, rather than for the first time after a five-year separation. They also seemed to be picking up an old dispute right where they had left off. During the drive to the house, laughing with feigned nonchalance, Steve tried to make Peter feel at home, not an easy thing to do since Beth pointedly ignored her brother, directing her comments to Steve and the kids. When Peter directed a comment to Beth, it was received with a curt reply. She never even looked at him. Steve's exasperated glances at her said clearly, "Pay attention to your brother," but she might as well have taken them to mean, "Didn't I tell you to get gas in the car." "God," Steve thought, "they look so much alike." Peter was talking to the kids. The six-year-old boy warmed up to him quickly, and the nine-year-old girl finally came around, too. Peter had always been comfortable with kids.

When they pulled up to the house, Peter got out of the car and took in the surroundings as if memorizing everything he saw.

Located in a subdivision at the edge of Anchorage, the house, which Steve had purchased when he became engaged to Evelyn, was agreeably rustic. With its cedar siding, wooden shingles and large rough-hewn deck, it was suitable to the woods that faced, somewhat ominously, the back yard and the mountain that loomed majestically above the trees. A brook tumbled nearby. A slight odor of pine wafted on the breeze.

“Coming inside, Peter?” Steve said, jarring Peter from his reverie.

The character of the adult male occupant was on display inside. The head of a huge ram hung above the fireplace in the large living room. Its thick and symmetrical horns spiraled and flared. On one wall a large pair of snowshoes made of spruce and buckskin hung crossways; on another hung the head and pelt of a bobcat, beneath a sixty-pound king salmon; the floor of the den was covered, almost from wall to wall by the pelt of a great grizzly bear. On the walls downstairs were moose, elk and caribou antlers. In the bedrooms there, photos of mountainous vistas on the walls and wildlife scenes on the rugs and bedspreads left a mood in harmony with the Alaskan wilderness.

“Do you want a beer?” Steve asked Peter, after showing him around in the company of the kids. Peter said he did; Steve wanted one himself. Especially in light of the coldness of his sister, Peter quickly came to like Steve, engaging him easily in small talk, telling him how much he liked the Alaskan beer, asking him about his work, and so forth. So Peter harbored some chagrin when Beth broke into their talk and said, “Come on, Peter, I’ll show you where you’ll be sleeping,” and took him off downstairs.

“Great guy you found,” Peter said, setting the duffel bags on the bed and glancing at the photos on the wall.

“I think so, too,” she said, turning to go, but stopping at

the door. She faced him, as he fidgeted with the bags at the bed. “Five years...” she said.

He looked at her and looked away. “Sorry I didn’t make the wedding.”

“So am I.”

“I had just returned from Africa and was recovering from illness...”

“No, Peter. Don’t lie to me. You had been back for some time, almost a year, in fact.” He hung his head as she continued. “But that isn’t the core of the matter...”

He looked at her, thinking she had not changed a bit for all the time that had passed.

“Peter, why didn’t you at least respond to my cards and letters? Had it not been for that agent of yours – I’m thinking of adopting him as my brother – we would not have known whether you were alive or dead. Mom was worried sick.”

“I’m sure she was,” he said, looking hard at her.

“Stop it. Are we going back to the same old stuff?”

“She’s the reason I left...”

“Her name’s Freda. Don’t you remember – pronounced with a long A?”

“She and the old man...”

“His name was Arthur. He died a long time ago. You might remember him.”

“I do. Unfortunately, I think about him every day.”

“Oh, do you? You surprise me, Peter – to remember who your parents are, after all this time.”

“You listen to me, Beth... I had to get away from Mom to go on living. The last time I saw her was when I made the mistake of driving to Drayton to spend a night in her serene company. By the following morning I had had enough. Do I need to give you the details? Just a score of little, irksome, manipulative things she did, at home and in public, to

control me and embarrass me. But you'd be familiar with her behavior, wouldn't you? As I say, I had had enough by morning. I returned to my apartment in the city, and spent the remainder of the day thinking how badly I wanted to die. The next two days, I stayed in bed till noon, unable to summon up sufficient energy and enthusiasm to get up and live. That's what her company does to me. As for the old man, I hate the memory of that fellow. He never even tried to be a father. I hate him. Oh, why do I always find myself falling into the trap of explaining myself to my younger sister?"

"Nice to discover that you've grown," she said, with a look of tired resignation. "What you're saying must have happened over five years ago. Has it ever crossed your mind – and I use the term loosely – that the issue may be more you than Mom. Mom considered hiring a private detective to find out where you were."

"I don't believe it."

"Didn't she send cards to your agent, like I did?"

"Only Christmas. I didn't get a birthday card from her three weeks ago."

"Did you send her one? Have you ever? Christmas or birthday?"

"Look, Beth, you haven't been a dutiful daughter, yourself. Why did you move to Alaska right after getting the vet degree?" They stared at each other, the one's eyes as fiery as the other's. "You moved to Alaska to put as much distance between you and her as you could manage, without repairing to Shanghai. Didn't you?"

Beth's face flamed. She would have let him have it, but Troy came into the room, asking for her. They went upstairs and kept a distance.

Steve was something of a cook. The supper was

scrumptious: salmon steaks, red potatoes, grilled in olive oil and garlic, fresh asparagus, a salad with oil and vinegar. Troy ate little, saying all he wanted was a hamburger. His dad could do nothing with him. But the dessert, chocolate mousse, enticed him. Everyone lingered at the table, over glasses of wine.

Peter tried several times to open conversation with Beth but each attempt was a failure. So he talked to Troy, who told him about the moose that had wandered into the backyard and become entangled in the clothesline.

“It took the line away,” he said. “Mommy was mad. – If I had Daddy’s gun, I would have shot it.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Jeannie said. “It would trample you like a twig.”

“I’m not a twig!”

The two proceeded to argue about that, until Beth said, “Troy, you’re going to bed,” and she picked him up and went off to the bedroom.

“He keeps talking about that moose,” Steve said, laughing briefly. “Though it happened more than a year ago, you’d think it was yesterday.”

Peter then talked to Jeannie at length about her studies: she was already reading Mark Twain. She had given up on *Huckleberry Finn*, finding it “hard and icky,” but she enjoyed *Tom Sawyer*.

“She reads at the tenth-grade level,” Steve said.

“I’ve always liked to read,” Jeannie said. “Do you like to read, too?”

“Yes,” Peter said, “and I’ve just had a book of my own published. Want to see it?”

“Sure!” she enthused.

So Peter hurried down to the duffel bag and came back with a large, hardcover volume. It was a coffee table book,

rich in photos with accompanying text. Ragged and dirty, but smiling, he was on the cover. Peter set the book in front of Jeannie, as Beth returned to the room.

“I just took the photos. A lady named Tess wrote the text.”

“Wow!” Jeannie exclaimed, flipping through the pages.

Jeannie lingered, awestruck, over the lions rolling in the dust, the cheetah gripping a gazelle by the throat, the pack of hyenas facing the camera with seedy countenances, the herd of cape buffalo with baleful expressions, the bored-looking hippo, so close one could see mucous on its snout, and the vistas – snow-covered Kilimanjaro, reddish in the light of the setting sun, the mist-shrouded river, the heavy veil of rain moving across a savanna, the forks of lightning in a black sky, and the blood-red sun sitting on the flat earth in a sky so beautiful it ravaged the soul.

Peter sat next to the girl. Steve moved over beside them. Beth cleared the table and did the dishes while they spent a long time looking at the book, with Peter describing the circumstances behind each picture. Steve wanted to know about the living conditions in the bush. Finally, Steve said, “Okay, off to bed you go, Jeannie.”

She hugged her mother and father, shyly putting her arms around Peter, before going off.

“I have to tell you two something,” Peter said, when they were alone.

Beth regarded him with a somewhat stricken look.

“What’s up?” Steve asked.

“I have a friend flying in tomorrow to go off into Denali with me.”

“Oh...” Beth said, regarding him intently, “how thoughtful

of you to tell us this before coming.”

He looked at her.

“This is not a male friend, I take it.”

“Correct.”

“Is she an adult?” Steve asked.

“Steve,” she said sharply, and continued to Peter, “Perhaps you didn’t tell us because it’s a lady.”

Peter regarded her again.

“Just how long have you known this lady friend?”

“Ah...” he stammered, “we’ve never met.”

Beth’s mouth opened.

“But we’ve been corresponding and talking on the phone for some time,” he added, quickly.

“Oh, boy...” Steve said.

“Let’s not get into the substance of this relationship,” Beth said. “The fact of the matter is you’re going into the wilderness with a woman you haven’t even met.”

“We both love the outdoors,” he offered.

“It would be better if you loved each other.”

“We do... sort of...”

“Goddam...” Steve put in, laughing.

“Steve!” Beth said sharply.

“He’s got more guts than I do.”

“It’s not as if we’re just meeting,” Peter said. “As I say, I’ve talked to her on the phone a number of times.”

“Well, that makes all the difference,” Steve said.

“She’s got to be spacey,” Beth said.

“She’s not meeting some maniac, Beth. She’s meeting me.”

Beth looked at him evenly.

“What could be safer for her than to meet here?” Peter went on. “That way she can get to know me for a couple days in the company of you two and the kids. Find out she’s not

dealing with a psycho...”

“Yeah, Beth,” Steve said, with a laugh, “that way she won’t have to worry about getting cut up when they go into the park.”

Beth just stared.

“She’s a nice lady,” Peter asserted. “I’ve got a picture of her. I’ll show you.”

He hurried off downstairs and came back with the photo, which he handed to Steve, saying, “Doesn’t she have the most beautiful dark eyes?”

“She sure does,” Steve said. “And the rest of her isn’t bad, either. Look, dear.” He showed the photo to Beth.

“How lovely,” she said, glancing at the photo and adding, somewhat forcefully, “Peter, you won’t be cohabiting with a strange woman in this house.”

“That’s not a problem, Beth... but she’s not a strange woman...”

“I wish you had told me about this stranger before coming.”

“I was afraid if you knew about her, you’d tell us not to come.”

“You may have been right there. You can keep Troy’s room downstairs. Your friend – what’s her name?”

“Nancy.”

“Nancy can sleep on the couch up here. It’s settled. I don’t want to hear any more about it. I’m going to bed.” She got up and left, saying as she went out, “I’ve heard quite enough for one night.”

“Alone in the wilderness with a woman you barely know...” Steve said. “Peter, you may find the mosquitoes a welcome distraction.” He laughed.

“Beth always did exaggerate. As I say, Nancy and I have talked and corresponded over a period of months. She’s

a mature woman; she's a nurse – an RN; she's looking for adventure. When I mentioned that Beth lived in Alaska, she was eager for the chance to get into the wilderness. She was the instigator of the trip. She knows me well enough.”

“I guess it's not quite as bad as combat – but close,” Steve said with a laugh. “Besides, you can always sneak off by yourself, saying you want to take shots of the mountains, when the exasperation becomes unbearable.”

Peter stared at him.

“She's pretty enough,” Steve said. As Peter had nothing further to say, he added, “Congratulations on the book.”

Peter thanked him.

“We have a copy. Jeannie was being nice. She's read the text. I learned something about cape buffalo and hyenas.”

“You have a copy?”

“Yeah. Your mother told Beth about it, and she ordered one from the bookstore downtown. Now, I understand, they have it in stock. I don't know if it's a best-seller, though.”

“That's great to hear,” Peter said, adding, “Have you met my mother, I wonder?”

“Sure, at the wedding in Drayton, but you wouldn't know about that, I guess.” Steve laughed, as Peter looked away. “Have you called your mother?” Steve asked, adding, when he received no reply, “Beth tells me you taught her how to use a camera.”

“Yes, when we were kids... She used to follow me around, begging me to take her along into the fields and woods around Drayton when I was taking my first shots. She sure has changed with regards to me.”

“I don't know...” Steve said, with a laugh. “A lot of her memories are positive. She said that once she had learned to use a camera, she had to have one of her own because she wanted to share the photography with you. She nagged Freda

and Arthur until she finally got one.”

“Yes, we had to nag a lot. The old man, in particular, was not encouraging of our adventures. But I loved to take pictures, so I kept at it. I’ve never tired of it. I didn’t realize it then, but in those early days, I developed an eye for photography and a rudimentary technique. Like then, I love the colors. I’ve tried black and white, but I keep going back to the colors. Certainly, in Africa, color was necessary. But even here – why, the change of season we had in the Midwest last year – you don’t have that here – you wouldn’t have believed it, Steve; it was the best I’ve seen! They say the state had the best colors in twenty-five years. I practically lived in the woods for two months, taking shots of the foliage. Some of those days, I’m sure, were once-in-a-lifetime experiences. The reds were just brilliant and the golds, shimmering in the breeze, and the peaches – how I love the color peach! All the colors were breathtaking! I had some of the best days processing color I’ve ever had.”

Steve was smiling at him, nodding.

“I see you are a hunter,” Peter said, abruptly, looking at the ram trophy over the fireplace.

“I was,” Steve said, somewhat wryly, “before Beth came into my life. It’s never been expressly forbidden, but it’s frowned upon.”

“She’s always loved animals...”

They were silent for a few moments.

“I’m surprised Beth took an interest in the African book,” Peter said, suddenly.

“She does,” Steve said. “So does your mother. You know, people might have wondered what became of you. You don’t live alone on this planet. You haven’t considered breaking the ice, and bringing Freda back into your life?”

“No.”

“Any contact with you would mean a lot to her.”

Peter looked away, then back. “Beth has told me a lot about you by way of her letters. You’re a Seal?”

Steve nodded, smiling.

“How did you handle the lack of sleep and cold water?”

Steve shrugged his shoulders, laughing dismissively.

“Really?” Peter said, looking at him intently. “Just like that, huh? No trauma?”

Steve laughed briefly. “You were in the Army, Beth tells me. Vietnam?”

“Yeah. Reconnaissance platoon. I was lucky – just a couple nasty incidents to take along with me through life. I didn’t realize how much that damn thing affected me till after I began to recover, to feel alive again. A lot of depression. Beth said you were there.”

“It was a god-awful business, wasn’t it?” Steve said, “I was in the Marine Corps. The Seal training was afterwards. I started with a line company and then switched to long-range patrols – six guys on our own deep inside enemy territory. Got surrounded once. Scary situation. It was the strangest thing – I could hear them all around us, but I was completely calm until I heard the blades of the choppers coming for us; only then did I have to fight down the panic.”

“Did you have nightmares when you got back?”

“Not really.”

“It’s strange how the mind works,” Peter said. “Once, when we were checking out an area after a fire, a guy popped up in front of me with his hands in the air. For some reason – middle class mores, I guess – I didn’t blow him away. At the time, certainly, and even for months or years afterwards, I don’t think I would have been bothered much if I had killed him. Scarcely would have given it a thought. But now, after all this time, I feel deeply relieved that I didn’t pull

the trigger.”

“When I came back, I was lucky to get married to a very supportive and understanding woman,” Steve said, his smile touched with irony.

“I think Beth told me in a letter that your wife passed away. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, she died of cancer. – Isn’t it getting late?”

“You know, my old man died in a hunting accident.”

“Beth told me...what a tragedy.”

“He tripped and fell, discharging the shotgun into his head, below the chin. Blew his head off, mostly. I was fifteen.”

“Were you alone?”

“No – Guy, a family friend, was there, too. We drove into town for help. Guy drove to the police station and then we drove with the cop to get Mom. She rode with Guy back there, following the cop, with me and Beth in the back seat. When we came, other police were there. Dad was beneath a white sheet. There was blood on the sheet. Mom didn’t cry; she didn’t lift the sheet, either. We waited a long time for the ambulance. I don’t remember anything after that until the funeral. The coffin was closed. Mom was different after Dad died. It was an accident.”

“That’s terrible...a young guy...to lose his father...” Steve said. – “When’s your friend flying in?”

“About noon. I’ll pick her up.”

“Take the car, and good luck,” Steve said, with a laugh. – “Nice talking to you, Peter.” He got up and stretched.

Peter was up early in the morning. He wanted to be in the woods at sunrise to take some shots. The day was foggy, so he took a trail that seemed to lead uphill and, just as the sun was fully above the horizon, he was standing on a mountain, from which he surmised the city of Anchorage and the bay

beyond could be seen when the fog lifted. He set the camera on the tripod and waited, occasionally checking the light meter. First the city, then the bay and, finally, on the horizon, the formation the native people named Sleeping Lady came into view. Instinctively selecting settings for the vision in his mind, he fired a shot. Then another and another, taking his time, studying the vista, getting an image in mind, before each shot, switching cameras once, continuing as the fog lifted from Sleeping Lady like a blanket.

Beth, in a robe, was alone at the kitchen table drinking coffee when he came in. “I got some promising shots from up above,” Peter said. “Where’s the coffee?”

She pointed.

“Dying for a cup,” he said, opening cupboards to find a cup.

“Above the sink,” she said.

He poured the cup.

“I didn’t mean to be insulting about your lady friend.”

“I didn’t think you were,” he said, sitting down at the table across from her. He poured a precise portion of cream into the cup. “Oh, I love your coffee,” he said, sipping from the cup. “You Alaskans know how to enjoy the truly fine things in life.”

“I wish you’d lighten up on Mom.”

“Not to worry, Beth. I’ve figured all that out. I understand everything now. It came to me a long time ago while I was lying in the hospital in Nairobi. Therefore, having come to an understanding of everything with regards to the parents – to wit, Arthur and Freda (with a long A) – they are no longer a problem. In fact, it is all ancient history.”

She regarded him evenly.

“It has to do,” he went on, “with the objective and the

subjective. The old man was in over his head with us. He had no idea whatever how to handle kids. In fact, he didn't even want us. Thus, he was a lousy father – objectively. The old lady did not – I emphasize *not* – want to be a mother. She wanted to be an artist. She didn't want us, either. Therefore, she was a lousy mother – objectively. (She's not much of an artist, either, but let that go for another time.) Are you with me?"

Beth looked away.

"Good. – Furthermore, how the old man – Arthur – managed to marry the old lady – Freda – and stay married to her is a mystery of unfathomable proportions. He simply was not in her league – in brains, in social sophistication, in anything, even artistic ability. He was only a second-rate lawyer. Thus, again, in their relationship, they were lousy parents – objectively."

"Can't you just be normal?" she asked.

"I am. Just listen – for there is the subjective, which is me. If their parenting was bad, objectively – and it was – I had to process this parenting, which, for me, was an unholy bitch. For someone else, perhaps for you – though that's hard to imagine – it may have been fine. But for me, it was a bitch. So I grant that I am a part of this sordid affair, because there is the subjective. But they were a part, as well – the objective. But that's not all."

"I knew it wouldn't be."

"Not only does the subjective affect the objective, as I've said, but the objective affects the subjective, too. Bad experiences diminish a person, thereby making further bad experiences worse. This is especially true in childhood, when the child is developing a subjective view of life. In a word, I was diminished by them, which made them even worse, later on, in adolescence, and later still, in my memories."

“I’m so glad you’ve made all this clear to me.”

“Don’t mention it, sis,” he responded, looking at her brightly.

“Mommy...” Jeannie came in, looking for a towel; she had to have a particular towel.

Beth gave the directions and Jeannie went out.

“How can you think well of them?” Peter asked. “Mom, for instance, wouldn’t let you have a dog until you were in eighth grade and then you had to beg no end to get one. She didn’t want an animal around the house.”

“I know... I told Mom I’d take care of it. When I took my appeal to Daddy, he just said, ‘Ask your mother.’ Checkmate for the kid. Mom finally had to give in, I guess.”

“And do you remember that the old man was away all the time – working – he was married to his law office? Certainly that counted for more than us.”

“Yes, that was always so irritating. He’d tell me he’d be home to take me somewhere, so I’d wait at the door with my schoolbag over my shoulder, but he wouldn’t show up. That happened time and again. It was so frustrating... But isn’t this old stuff? Oh, Peter, you always bring out the worst in me!”

“Good morning...” Steve said, with a laugh, coming sleepily into the kitchen. “Where’s the coffee?”

“Right where it always is, dear.”

“You’re a man like me, Steve,” Peter said. “The world’s not a bad place, so long as it has coffee and vistas to shoot.”

“All set to pick up the lady love?” Steve said, sitting down with a cup of coffee at the table across from Peter.

“I’ll go get her at eleven.”

“How old did you say she is?”

“Actually, I don’t know. About my age – thirtyish.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised,” Beth said. “What did you say her middle name is?”

Peter looked at her, puzzled.

Beth nodded, saying, “She’ll sleep on the couch.”

“You are making my day, Peter, just to think it’s not me,”
Steve said.