

CHAPTER 12

We said goodbye. I watched the cab out of sight. I went back up the steps and into the bedroom and pulled the bed to pieces and remade it. There was a long dark hair on one of the pillows. There was a lump of lead at the pit of my stomach.

The French have a phrase for it. The bastards have a phrase for everything and they are always right.

To say goodbye is to die a little.

. . .RAYMOND CHANDLER
The Long Goodbye

It was hot in Worcester. It was hotter in August than it had been in June. I had a towel around my neck to soak up the sweat. I might as well have had a dog collar on for all the good it did. I sat on the edge of a bed unpacking. It was early afternoon and already the sun was banging its way into the room like it was the only place it had to go. The fan kept the dust on the floor up in the air to play with the light, but it didn't do much more. Through the open window I heard kids playing ball in the back yard. They called it playing ball. I called it an afternoon-long argument. It sounded like you couldn't wiggle your toe out there without someone calling foul. I didn't have to listen hard. Their voices came into the room like the sun: unrelenting, innocent.

"Mr. Wood! Oh, Mr. Wood!" I strolled out to the back porch with my towel and looked down into the yard. It was Mike and Punky and David — the kids from up and down-stairs — and some other kids I didn't know.

"Our ball went on your porch," Mike shouted.

I looked around for the ball. It was one of those red rubber things that cracked and show their brown insides. It had rolled behind the planter. I picked it up and threw it down to them.

"Thank you, Mr. Wood." Boy were they ever polite when they needed you. It was a lot cooler out on the porch — at least a degree. I sat down on a chair and lighted a cigarette. That made it even cooler. I watched the smoke curl around my hand as I shook out the match. The match made me think of the trip. I touched the end of it. It was still hot. That was the trip all right. It flares, dies and stays hot. The trip had happened, ended, and yet inside me it was still going. It had a lot of inertia. I wondered how far it would take me. I exercised my legs by putting them up on another chair and let the trip burn in my mind.

I thought about endings and goodbyes and wondered how many of the kids I had said goodbye to. It was a silly sentimental question but I wondered about it all the same. I ticked the kids off on my fingers. That was one thing I'd learned in thirty-five days — the names of all the kids. Rhoda Noyes? Rhoda Noyes. I couldn't think of Rhoda without thinking of Susan Lincoln and as soon as I thought about Susan I thought about Betty Baker and Claire Mayo. A quartet.

Vanessa Garrison? Did Vanessa even go to Capri? I couldn't remember her getting on the bus. I passed her over in a hurry. Therese Montaigne was another. I never got to say so-long to her. I saw her once in Paris, on the other side of a busy Metro station.

Ann Hendricks, Bobbi Seward, Jane Brown, Agatha Jones. Had I said goodbye to them? I remembered saying see-you-later to Jane. She hadn't gone to Capri because an insect bite had swollen her cheek to the size of a baseball, and she had been stretched out on her bed with door open when I left the dorm in Rome for the last time. I'd looked in and asked her how she felt. Miserable, she'd said. Then we'd said see-you-later. The rest of them, I just couldn't remember how it ended.

A drop of sweat wandered out to the end of my nose and hung there. Good old Wood. Man with the photographic memory. Take away his notes and it crumbles into glittery incoherent fragments. Fragments. I lit another cigarette and considered four of them: Fisher, Pierce, Heller and Bill Brown. I knew I'd never said goodbye to them because we were talking one night in Paris and were interrupted. We didn't say goodbye because we never knew it was goodbye. Truncation. Stopping without an end. An old story. Laura Johnson knew it was the end. Don't ask me how, but she was there with the rest of them that night and she kissed me goodbye.

I flicked ashes into the planter and watched them curl and turn grey. Who else hadn't I said goodbye to? Phylis Gordon for one, Joy Gray for another, Tracy Cummings for a third, Dave Abrams for a fourth, Porter Portman for a fifth — the rat, Des Jencks for a sixth, Vittoria Palazzo for a seventh, Lana Monroe for an eighth and Marina Giaconda for a ninth. That's over half the kids on the trip. What did it matter? It mattered! It mattered a lot. Things are supposed to have a beginning and an end. That ending is important. It rounds out relationships the way coffee, brandy and a good cigar round out a meal.

I remembered saying goodbye to Taylor Nash, mostly because it wasn't goodbye. He and I and Watson and Karl spent one of our last afternoons in Paris wandering around. They were shopping, trying to fill those lists of things to bring home to the infinite relatives, or just get rid of their money. It was getting late in the afternoon and Taylor and I were leaning against opposite arches of an arcade in that commercial mess between the Louvre and the Opera looking out at the passing traffic. Watson and Karl were inside a leather goods store negotiating a leather bag. Taylor was wearing his blue canvas sneakers and I was wearing his leather bootlets. He glanced at his own feet and then looked over at mine. I looked down at them too.

"Let's trade shoes," he said. "I can wear those to church."

So I took off my — his — shoes and he took off his shoes and, one at a time, we threw them over to each other. He put on the leather

jobs and I got into the tennies. Watson and Karl appeared without a leather bag and it was time to go home. We shared the Metro line as far as Denfert-Rochereau.

"See you tomorrow," came floating up from the ball game in the backyard. David and Punky were going in to eat. Their feet clattered on the back stairs beyond the porch. That was the difference. Continuity and termination. See you tomorrow, hasta la vista, au revoir, until then I am sincerely yours — they all contain the seed of going on, of continuity, of life. Goodbye, adios, farewell contain no seed and they are as terminal as the big sleep. Every goodbye is an intimation of the long goodbye, that goodbye after which no goodbye is ever said again, except beside the grave from which no answer comes. You accept it, or you don't. And you'd better.

Yes, Wood, I said to myself, yes and no. You're getting too serious. The funny thing about saying goodbye to Taylor was that it wasn't goodbye anyhow. I saw him later that night, sitting in front of the dorms with Candy and Wanda and Sven and Bill. We talked and after a while he turned to me and said:

"I feel a song. Do you have a pencil and a piece of paper?"

I had a felt tip pen and a book with a white fly-leaf. I gave them to him. He wrote:

I found on this day one very good thing,
 The power in words, the power to sing.
 The ways of life are not always right,
 In the days to come, I just might,
 Say some things that just aren't right,
 And I'll fight the day to sleep the night.
 When morning comes, I'll say some more,
 After hours of walking the floor.
 But I found on this day one very good thing,
 The power of words, the power to sing.

There was no goodbye when we parted that night. There didn't seem to be any point. It would have been putting the cork in an empty bottle.

The last people I saw in Parks were Karl Prinz, Erica Cruz, Mrs. Needham and Janine Eber. We said goodbye. We met at a small cafe across the street from the Gare Luxembourg. The Boulevard St. Michel was heavy with life and the trees in the Luxembourg Gardens were

a dusty green under the yellow sky. It might be the most beautiful spot in the world for the world is there, swirling on its way. The seats of the cafe wandered out into the street and I sat at one dripping with sun. Erica and Karl moved in my direction down the street. They were holding hands, the only couple to make it through the tour. Erica was toying with a single white daisy. It was her birthday. Karl had a beer and Erica a Coke and we pushed words at each other across the table. We shouldn't have. There was no need to. It was nice just to be there. Janine and Mrs. Needham came along and flopped into seats and had Cokes. Janine had a present for me, a hardbound comic book called Asterix le Gaulois. I loaned her the one I was reading: L'Oreille Cassee. The hero of mine was a young newspaper reporter named Tin-Tin; the hero of hers was an ancient Gaul named Asterix. They had one thing in common: they made good reading. Janine and I discussed their respective merits while the sky turned to hazy gold and the Cokes went flat. Mrs. Needham wanted an omelette and they were hungry. Places wanted me to go to them. There were goodbyes. It wasn't painful. I was beginning to understand. We split.

Bye-bye. Bye-bye. I sat slumped in the chair. Bye-bye. Bye-bye. Homer came wagging his tail up to me and put his paws in my lap and licked my face.

"Okay, Homer. Let's feed you. Time to go out." I fed Homer and put him on the leash and walked him up to the park to wait for Ingrid to come home from work. My beautiful park. Where were the trees? Where was the little old man to take my franc and give me a seat beside the fountain? Where were the gardens? The palace? The Punch-and-Judy shows? The merry-go-round? Homer romped and fetched sticks and I looked and could not see. I was still in Paris.

* * *

Autumn came, putting weeks between us and the trip and still the trip went on. Early in August we'd visited Nybia and Janine and toward the end of August we had written each of the kids individually, including the letter in an envelope filled with map blanks, bus seating charts, and adjective checklists. In all of our minds the trip went on each day, being reformed and remolded and recreated. And forgotten. This trip was a Group L experience despite the fact that it was happening in scattered places and scattered times. Now the trip was happening all over the United States and the connections between the kids and between us and the kids were by mail. It was slow motion. You would say hi how are you one week and next month you would hear I'm fine how are you. Sometimes you would hear other sorts of things in the webs of letters, things that weren't so nice. The first letter we received in answer to ours was from Porter

Portman. It was his last. The letter was typed on bonded paper embossed with the seal of the United States in shiny gold. The conclusion read:

...Now that the trip is over, I have nothing more to gain from anyone on the trip and can tell you of my little feat. I really outdid myself. If you will recall, after Venice I was never very far from you and Beck. I was looking for an opening, an opening which I found in Rome, on the night of your birthday. The key man in my plot at this time was one Dino, a very learned man, a very self-righteous man, a very pliable man. Ask Beck to think who was first off the bus after your little binge. After all, someone had to hurry get Dino out of his office, where he never would have seen you, and get him where he could and did see you, before you could get to your room. Yep, it was lil old me. Beck's assistance with our Rome presentation was exactly the opening I was looking for to dispose of him. I merely told Dino and the T-C's about it and the rest is history. Incidentally, about the "sadness in my eyes" — camouflage. I still had much to gain from the others and didn't want them to know that I was responsible for your destruction. A good saboteur always covers his tracks, and I am the best saboteur you'll ever know. In closing let me say that I have neither the time, nor the desire to invest my efforts in your project.

"He who enrages the rhino, should not be surprised when he is crushed by it."

Portman

As I said, the trip was still going on, each day being recreated, remolded, reformed, and forgotten. Portman's letter was unique in our growing stack of letters, but then Portman was pretty unique anyhow. Of the twenty-six kids who responded to our initial letter, only one other refused to participate in the post trip phase of the project. But Bill Brown had reasons you had to respect:

Well, it took me long enough to answer your letter, since I have been busy working ever since I got home.

In reply to your question, whether or not I wanted to draw maps for you, my answer is NO, I do not want to cooperate. My reason for this is that I do not want to be bothered with drawing maps. Secondly, I am usually working and with school coming up I really do not have very much time to spend drawing maps.

Please do not interpret this answer as if I am not drawing maps because I do not like you or anything like that, because you are my friend. I really did miss you as courier because you were a bit more permissive and easy going than Odin or Tom. I did not like Tom as courier and most of the time wished you were the courier instead of him. I want you to know that Nobody influenced my decisions in drawing maps in Europe or now. It was my decision to draw maps of London and Rome and fill out the stereo matrices, and it is my decision now not to draw the maps after the trip.

I am, though, drawing a map of where I live in case you ever wanted an Idea of the area where I live: **BUT THAT IS ALL I AM GOING TO COOPERATE** (just to make myself clear). I do hope you do not take this personally as I am your friend.

Yours truly,

Bill

Very clearly, the trip was going on and Group L was only in the earliest stages of working out the consequences of its experience. In the early stages of the correspondences the law was long letters. Rumor reached me that Nybia had written Janine a letter one hundred pages long. I got many over seven pages long, containing enough details about everything to swamp project central. Where their energy came from I don't know. Mine began to dry up as I began to get going on analyzing the

summer's work. My letters grew shorter and shorter, and the answers that came back to me followed suit. Three pages became the norm, then two. By Christmas it had dwindled to cards. But there was a richness in the long series of letters that trickled in during the fall, a detailed depth and a free-flowing imagination and a seriousness of intent that resonated with every memory of the trip. As the letters came in, images changed and shifted and the trip was for me an image constantly growing rather than shrinking. Some of the letters contained information particularly relevant to the summer work:

...This summer helped me a lot, particularly your program. I came to Cornell completely blind. I didn't know the campus at all and I used what I learned this summer to put it all together, and the result was that I learned more about the campus faster than I normally would have. Learning all at once to cope with a certain environment makes everything clearer. I lived my whole life in Fredonia and I couldn't have given you directions on how to get around in it. But I've seen the overall picture of Cornell and I can get around very well. Enough of that.

...And about the maps, I really enjoyed doing them. I sat at my desk remembering little bits and pieces and trying to put them together. As you can tell it was unsuccessful, but it was an enjoyable, relaxing experience (I just went through a week of exams).

That's all, Love Phylis

But the trip was more than maps. Maybe I haven't been able to make that clear. Maybe David Abrams can help:

...First of all, in the past few months I have been very involved in many extra-curricular activities. I am involved in a sensitivity class, tutor a child in the inner-city, partake in planning school functions (for my first time ever), take classes in Kundalini Yoga, and Transcendental Meditation. Mostly I have been involved in living yoga and seeing the truth. For example, wherever I can, I get up at 5:00 a.m., do an hour of Yoga, take a cold shower, and then I

do an hour of meditation. I am very happy for most of these days (which are infrequent because I go to sleep so late).

Keickesville is a town in which most of the kids are strung out on some kind of dope most of the time. Last year all of my friends did dope a lot and I got into it with them. When I got involved with you, something strange happened. Many of my new friends are Yogis and they are very nice people, but my old friends have proceeded to follow me in doing Yoga also. No one does dope anymore (at least of my friends). Denis, do you remember that "community" spirit that Bob talked about in Rome? I feel as if I am undergoing that same type of "community" here. I think it is very nice, even if it is kind of fake.

David isn't big on kidding himself.

A lot of letters ended in a common note. The example is Laura Johnson's but it could easily have been anyone else's:

P.S. Any place you want to hold a reunion is find with me. I'd like to talk to you and Bob sometime and I'll call first!!!!

P.P.S. Hi! Ingrid! If you're what Denis described you as, I'd really like to meet you.

Throughout the fall talk of a reunion grew. But it was integral to the rest of what was going on. The trip hadn't ended. It seemed silly that we were all spread out over the U.S.A. No one had said goodbye, well, practically no one. Talk of the reunion was interlarded with news, progress and memories.

Marina Giaconda wanted to do her senior high school project on the mapping problem. She wanted to draw, and analyze, maps of a novel environment. The environment was at hand: Boston, a place she'd seldom visited despite her proximity and a place she was beginning to visit with increasing frequency. Bob, Ingrid and I spent a day with her and Lana Monroe, discussing Marina's project, video taping them about the maps, seeing the town of Wakefield through their eyes, and, seeing her slides of Europe.

Janine sent Bob a letter on a balloon. We talked to the kids by

phone. Talk of the reunion grew. We discovered that more kids than we'd thought were college freshman. Talk of the reunion grew. Wanda Pierce got married and Bob Watson drove three hundred miles to attend the wedding. Talk of the reunion grew. Janine collected memories of the bus seating arrangements of the play. Our second envelope containing map blanks, adjective checklists and bus seating charts went out. By late November we had twenty-three sets of schedules back from the first mailing. By mid December we had sixteen sets returned from our second mailing. Talk of the reunion was scrawled on maps, around adjective checklists, on bus seating charts.

Naturally it was Janine that finally got the reunion off the ground. I messed her up by switching hotels on her at the last minute but she was the one who wrote everyone when, where, and how. In addition to being one of the project investigators she was also the Group L social secretary. Group L no longer had even the vestiges of being a passive tour group, nor were Bob and I anything but fellow members. It was a nice feeling.

Christmas cards started to flow in. Vittoria Palazzo wrote: "As for the maps, my sentiments are the same as Taylor's: I don't want to but I will." That's how I felt about the reunion: I didn't want to, but I went.

* * *

What I didn't like was the idea of a reunion. It suggested octogenarians tripping over each other's canes and saying "Is that really you, Herman?" R-E-U-N-I-O-N. It was something for your high school class to get keen on when other things in life lost their interest, or a way to raise money for your college. It had to do with a world alien to Group L.

I was also a little worried about the timing. It was to be a day's length. Sometimes that can be a long time. Sometimes you can just begin to get into things in a day. A day was either far too long or far too short, but it wasn't right. We should have done it right for three days and rented a bus.

But the real reason was personal. It was happening smack dab in the middle of Christmas vacation, smack dab in the middle of Christmas. Christmas doesn't mean a whole lot for a whole lot of people but for Ingrid and me it means almost everything. It means a huge Christmas tree and lots of presents and getting up early Christmas morning and late the rest of the time and it means Ingrid takes a week's vacation and makes lots of

cookies and fruitcakes and we just weren't sure we wanted to break into all that with a trip to Fun City.

So we didn't want to go, but we did. At 6:00 a.m. on the Wednesday morning following Christmas the four of us piled into Bob's car and headed south. The four of us were me and Ingrid and Bob and a friend of his named Jill. On the road right behind us was Lana Monroe with Bob Watson, who had driven to Worcester with a friend all the way from Indiana. The whole thing was so crazy, it had to be right. The day was perfect, cold as chilled champagne and just as clear and effervescent. The sun chuckled at us over the rim of the world someplace in Connecticut and we stopped to get a quart of milk and a box of doughnuts. It was a nice trip down and on that day New York looked as fresh and clean as a baby's smile. The doorman at the Commodore didn't sneer at the '64 Chevy and, for not much more than all the gold in Fort Knox, agreed to park the car. We wrestled the video equipment into the lobby and fussed about our room at the desk. The lobby wasn't as big as Grand Central but it tried and there in the center of it stood Janine Eber, as sparkling as a daffodil in the spring. The fur of her collar matched that of her muff and she wore her hat at a cocky angle that I thought had gone out with Greta Garbo. It hadn't — it had the same impact as ever. We were gentled to the seventh floor by an elevator that made all the sound of a leaf falling and followed a green livery to our suite. We had a living room, two bedrooms, and two baths. The decor was there but it didn't give you a black eye. The Chrysler Building poked at the clouds out our east window and Grand Central rumbled beneath our west window. Behind the station the Pan Am Building blocked the sky the way Jim Otto blocks for the Raiders. Our south exposure looked across 42nd Street at acres of glass windows.

Lana, Watson and friend arrived shortly after we did and Group L was getting together again, which was fine, except that we had nothing to talk about.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Good."

"And how are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine too."

"Good."

Silence.

As the afternoon wore on the suite started filling up. In the end nineteen people showed up. Karl — all the way from Milwaukee — and Erica came and let us laugh about his misadventures in the big city. Claire Mayo and Betty Baker showed up and we picked up some news about Miss Bloch and their future plans. We heard about Mrs. Needham and played around with the video tapes. Then Nybia rolled in dressed for an opening of the opera, looking elegant and supercilious except that she was still Nybia and nothing could ever take that away from her. Taylor Nash showed up all the way from Indiana with three friends. They were staying in New Jersey. Vittoria made it away from the gas pumps at her father's garage for the late afternoon all the way from Far Rockaway — and that's a long way from anywhere I've ever been. I gave a short and ill-conceived talk on the progress of the map analysis to which everyone listened politely but without comprehension, making me feel like a tour leader and that was it. I went out into the city for a walk with Leslie, Candy and her friend. Candy and friend had taken the train from Iowa to stay with Leslie. It was dark out and the city was bright with lights the way only New York is bright with lights. Park Avenue looked like something out of Midsummer Night's Dream with twinkling fairy lights on the branches of all the little trees below the banks of lights in the walls of buildings beneath the stars. Yeah, you could even see stars.

Back at the Commodore kids were leaving. Claire and Betty had gone to have dinner in the city with their parents. Nybia's younger brother came to pick up Nybia, Erica and Janine. They were going to come back later and then keep on reunioning for a couple of days. Candy and friend were flying home that night. Candy had a job and had only taken a couple of days off. Bob and Jill were going to spend the night at the Commodore along with Lana, Watson and friend. Lana was planning on staying until New Year's; who knew what Watson and friend were planning. Some of them had wandered down to Times Square to look at the lights. It was time for me and Ingrid to leave. We were taking the bus back to Worcester that night. Bob Watson left with us.

The three of us descended to earth and wound through tunnels beneath it to the subway shuttle to Times Square. We sat and waited in the shuttle while it tried to vibrate our teeth loose. We hustled against time through the endless corridors connecting Times Square with the Port Authority. Bob and I went to buy tickets while Ingrid dashed down to hold the bus. Bob and I parted in the swirl of humanity that makes that building unique even in New York. His cheeks were flushed and his long red scarf picked up his color and threw it back in his face. His real hair shone darkly in the yellow light. He looked healthy, alive and real. In

that moment he was Group L, all of it. Since I was in New York I said:

"Take care."

"I will."

"Okay. Bye-bye."

"Bye-bye. See you."

I left him standing at the head of the escalator and ran to make my bus. That was it.