When I was in the second grade, we moved to Stratford, Connecticut, and I fell stone in love with the pretty teenage girl who lived next door. She never looked twice at me in the day-time, but at night, as I lay in bed and drifted toward sleep, we ran away from the cruel world of reality again and again.

My new teacher was Mrs. Taylor, a kind lady with gray Elsa Lanchester–Bride of Frankenstein hair and protruding eyes. “When we’re talking, I always want to cup my hands under Mrs. Taylor’s peepers in case they fall out,” my mom said.

Our new third-floor apartment was on West Broad Street. A block down the hill, not far from Teddy’s Market and across from Burrets Building Materials, was a huge tangled wilderness area with a junkyard on the far side and a train track running through the middle. This is one of the places I keep returning to in my imagination; it turns up in my books and stories again and again, under a variety of names. The kids in It called it the Barrens; we called it the Jungle. Dave and I explored it for the first time not long after we had moved into our new place. It was summer. It was hot. It was great. We were deep into the green mysteries of this cool new playground when I was struck by an urgent need to move my bowels. “Dave,” I said. “Take me home! I have to push!” (This was the word we were given for this particular function.)

David didn’t want to hear it. “Go do it in the woods,” he said. It would take at least half an hour to walk me home, and he had no intention of giving up such a shining stretch of time just because his little brother had to take a dump.

“I can’t!” I said, shocked by the idea. “I won’t be able to wipe!”

“Sure you will,” Dave said. “Wipe yourself with some leaves. That’s how the cowboys and Indians did it.”

By then it was probably too late to get home, anyway; it was clear I was out of options. Besides, I was enchanted by the idea of going to the bathroom like a cowboy. I pretended I was Hopalong Cassidy, squatting in the underbrush with my gun drawn, not to be caught unawares even at such a personal moment. I did my business, and took care of the cleanup as my older brother had suggested, carefully wiping with big handfuls of shiny green leaves. These turned out to poison ivy.

Two days later, I was bright red from the backs of my knees to my shoulderblades. My crotch itched all the way up to my ribcage, it seemed. Yet worst of all was the hand I had wiped with; it swelled to the size of Mickey Mouse’s after Donald Duck has bopped it with a hammer, and gigantic blisters formed at the places where the fingers rubbed together. When they burst, they left deep divots of raw pink flesh. For six weeks, I sat in lukewarm starch baths, feeling miserable and humiliated and stupid, listening through the open door as my mother and brother laughed and listened to Peter Tripp’s countdown on the radio and played Crazy Eights.

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Dave was a great brother, but too smart for a ten-year-old. His brains were always getting him in trouble, and he learned at some point (probably after I had wiped myself with poison ivy) that it was usually possible to get Brother Stevie to join him in the point position when trouble was in the wind.

Dave never asked me to shoulder all the blame for his often brilliant screw-ups—he was neither a sneak nor a coward—but on several occasions I was asked to share it. Which was, I think, why we both got in trouble when Dave dammed up the stream running through the Jungle and flooded much of lower West Broad Street. Sharing
the blame was also the reason we both ran the risk of getting killed while implementing his potentially lethal school science project.

This was probably 1958. I was at Center Grammar School; Dave was at Stratford Junior High. Mom was working at the Stratford Laundry, where she was the only white lady on the mangle crew. That’s what she was doing—feeding sheets into the mangle—while Dave constructed his Science Fair project. My big brother wasn’t the sort of boy to content himself drawing frog-diagrams on construction paper or making The House to toilet-tissue rolls; Dave aimed for the stars. His project that year was Dave’s Super Duper Electromagnet. My brother had great affection for things which were super duper and things which began with his own name; this latter habit culminated with Dave’s Daily, which we will come to in a later chapter. His Duper Electromagnet wasn’t very super duper; in fact, it may not have worked at all—I don’t remember for sure. It did come out of an actual book, rather than Dave’s head, however. The idea was this: you magnetized a spike nail by rubbing it against a regular magnet. The magnetic charge imparted to the spike would be weak, the book said, but enough to pick up a few iron filings. After trying this, you were supposed to wrap a length of copper wire around the barrel of the spike, and attach the ends of the wire to the terminals of a dry-cell battery. According to the book, the electricity would strengthen the magnetism, and you could pick up a lot more iron filings. Dave didn’t just want to pick up a stupid pile of metal flakes, though; Dave wanted to pick up Buicks, railroad boxcars, possibly Army transport planes. Dave wanted to turn on the juice and move the world in its orbit. Pow! Super!

We each had our part to play in creating the Super Duper Electromagnet. Dave’s part was to build it. My part would be to test it. Little Stevie King, Stratford’s answer to Chuck Yeager.

Dave’s new version of the experiment bypassed the pokey old dry cell (which was probably flat anyway when we bought it at the hardware store, he reasoned) in favor of actual wall-current. Dave cut the electrical cord off an old lamp someone had put out on the curb with the trash, stripped the coating all the way down to the plug, then wrapped his magnetized spike in spirals of bare wire. Then, sitting on the floor in the kitchen of our West Broad Street apartment, he offered me the Super Duper Electromagnet and bade me do my part and plug it in.

I hesitated—give me at least that much credit—but in the end, Dave’s manic enthusiasm was too much to withstand. I plugged it in. There was no noticeable magnetism, but the gadget did blow out every light and electrical appliance in our apartment, every light and electrical appliance in the building, and every light and electrical appliance in the building next door (where my dream-girl lived in the ground-floor apartment). Something popped in the electrical transformer out front, and some cops came. Dave and I spent a horrible hour watching from our mother’s bedroom window, the only one that looked out on the street (all the others had a good view of the grassless, turd-studded yard behind us, where the only living thing was a mangy canine named Roop-Roop). When the cops left, a power truck arrived. A man in spiked shoes climbed the pole between the two apartment houses to examine the transformer. Under other circumstances, this would have absorbed us completely, but not that day. That day we could only wonder if our mother would come and send us to reform school. Eventually, the lights came back on and the power truck went away. We were not caught and lived to fight another day.

Dave decided he might build a Super Duper Glider instead of a Super Duper Electromagnet for his science project. I, he told me, would get to take the first ride. Wouldn’t that be great?

(End of excerpt #1. In this next passage, the author is now in high school.)

Hardly a week after being sprung from detention hall, I was once more invited to step down to the principal’s
It wasn’t Mr. Higgins who wanted to see me, at least; this time the school guidance counselor had issued the summons. There had been discussions about me, he said, and how to turn my “restless pen” into more constructive channels. He had enquired of John Gould, editor of Lisbon’s weekly newspaper, and had discovered Gould had an opening for a sports reporter. While the school couldn’t insist that I take this job, everyone in the front office felt it would be a good idea. Do it or die, the G.C.’s eyes suggested. Maybe that was just paranoia, but even now, almost forty years later, I don’t think so.

I groaned inside. But, what could I do? I rechecked the look in the guidance counselor’s eyes and said I would be delighted to interview for the job. Gould—not the well-known New England humorist or the novelist who wrote The Greenleaf Fires but a relation of both, I think—greeted me warily but with some interest. We would try each other out, he said, if that suited me.

Now that I was away from the administrative offices of Lisbon High, I felt able to muster a little honesty. I told Mr. Gould that I didn’t know much about sports. Gould said, “These are games people understand when they’re watching them drunk in bars. You’ll learn if you try.”

He gave me a huge roll of yellow paper on which to type my copy—I think I still have it somewhere—and promised me a wage of half-a-cent a word. It was the first time someone had promised me wages for writing.

The first two pieces I turned in had to do with a basketball game in which an LHS player broke the school scoring record. One was a straight piece of reporting. The other was a sidebar about Robert Ransom’s record-breaking performance. I brought both to Gould the day after the game so he’d have them for Friday, which was when the paper came out. He read the game piece, made two minor corrections, and spiked it. Then he started in on the feature piece with a large black pen.

I took my fair share of English Lit. classes in my two remaining years at Lisbon, and my fair share of composition, fiction, and poetry classes in college, but John Gould taught me more than any of them, and in no more than ten minutes. I wish I still had the piece—it deserves to be framed, editorial corrections and all—but I can remember pretty well how it went and how it looked after Gould had combed through it with that black pen of his. Here’s an example:

Last night, in the well-loved gymnasium of Lisbon High School, partisans and Jay Hills fans alike were stunned by an athletic performance unequalled in school history. Bob Ransom, known as Bullet Bob for both his size and speed, scored 37 points. Yes, you heard me right. Plus, he did it with grace, speed, and an odd courtesy as well, committing only two personal fouls in his night’s quest for a record that has eluded Lisbon记录保持者 since the years of Korea.

Gould stopped at “the years of Korea” and looked up at me. “What year was the last record made?” he asked. Luckily, I had my notes. “1953,” I said. Gould grunted and went back to work. When he finished marking my copy in the manner indicated above, he looked up and saw something on my face. I think he must have mistaken it for horror. It wasn’t; it was pure revelation.

He laughed. “If that’s true, you’ll never have to work for a living. You can do this instead. Do I have to explain any of these marks?”

“I know,” I said, meaning both things: yes, most of it was good—okay anyway, serviceable—and yes, he had only taken out the bad parts. “I won’t do it again.”

Why, wondered, didn’t English teachers ever do this? It was like the Visible Man old Mr. Diehl had on his desk in the biology room.

“I only took out the bad parts, you know,” Gould said. “Most of it’s pretty good.”

“I know,” I said, meaning both things: yes, most of it was good—okay anyway, serviceable—and yes, he had only taken out the bad parts. “I won’t do it again.”

He laughed. “If that’s true, you’ll never have to work for a living. You can do this instead. Do I have to explain any of these marks?”

“No,” I said.

“When you write a story, you’re telling yourself the story,” he said. “When you rewrite, your main job is taking out all the things that are not the story.” Gould said something else that was interesting on the day I turned in my first two pieces: write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open. Your stuff starts out being just for you, in other words, but then it goes out. Once you know what the story is and get it right—as right as you can, anyway—it belongs to anyone who wants to read it. Or criticize it. If you’re very lucky, more will want to do the former than the latter.
On a separate sheet of paper, answer every part of the following questions. You must write complete, thoughtful sentences.

1. In the first excerpt, King describes his older brother’s “manic enthusiasm” as “too much to withstand.” Rephrase this idea in your own words, explaining what King means when he uses this phrase to describe his brother.

2. Repetition is an interesting device that King uses twice in the first excerpt. Locate and write down the sentences in which King uses this technique. (Yes, I want you to write a total of four sentences here – three are short and one is long.) Looking at his use of this literary technique, analyze and explain why the technique is effective in both of these passages.

3. John Gould, the newspaper editor, “spiked” King’s first article. Looking at the sentence for context clues, what do you think this newspaper term means? Explain your guess.

4. What is this thing? Who owned it? Explain the analogy King uses involving this item and his English teachers.

5. Gould’s writing advice to King included, “Write with the door closed; rewrite with the door open.” In your own words, explain what this figuratively means. Do you think there is value in this advice? Would you write differently if you knew your essay or paper was going to be seen by a large audience, say in a newspaper or on the internet? Does the audience make a difference to you as a writer? Should it?