

# Autobiographical Paragraph

The first death which occurred in our family was a cocker spaniel. Jill. Jealous Jill. We called her that because she was very jealous when my little brother was born. Jill died of distemper, which I thought meant bad temper because she was jealous. But before she died, she bit me. Not just before she died, but some time before. I was harassing her with a rubber submarine, as I often did in the pantry of our house in Barrington, Rhode Island, and she turned on me and took a chunk out of my wrist; it looked like a bite out of an apple from my point of view. I guess it wasn't because I don't have a scar. I ran to my mother and she said, "You had it coming to you, dear, for harassing the dog with a rubber submarine."

—Spalding Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, ©1986

O God, my God, what misery I experienced in my boyhood, and how foolish I was made to look! I was told that, at my age, the proper thing to do was to pay due attention to those who taught me how to get on in the world, and to excel in the kind of literary and rhetorical learning which would provide me with a reputation among men and with deceitful riches. I was then sent to school to become learned, though I, poor boy, had no idea of what was the use of learning. Nevertheless, if I failed to work hard at my studies, I was beaten. This kind of discipline was considered very good by our ancestors, and many people before us, who had gone through this way of life, had already organized wearisome courses of study along which we were compelled to go; the trouble was multiplied and so was the sorrow upon the sons of Adam.

—*The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 1:9, translation by Rex Warner, ©1963

## *The Remnants of Carnival*

No, not of this latest carnival. Yet for some strange reason the last few days have taken me back to my childhood and those Ash Wednesdays in deserted streets where the debris of streamers and confetti was being blown around. Now and then, some old woman heading for church with a veil over her head, could be seen crossing the road which always looked so empty after carnival. Until the following year. And as the festivities approached, how can I describe my excitement? As if the world, like some great bud, were about to blossom into a huge red rose. As if the streets and squares of Recife were finally coming into their own. As if human voices were chanting at long last my secret capacity for pleasure. Carnival was mine, all mine.

—Clarice Lispector, *Selected Crônicas*, translation by Giovanni Pontiero, ©1992

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of those times was a very short duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary—a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives to him the proud name of being a kind master. I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it. Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger.

—*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*, circa 1844

In 1905, my seventh year, the first great change in my life took place. We moved house... The "New House," as we continued to call it, was a large one even by my present standards; to a child it seemed less like a house than a city... To me, the important thing about the move was that the background of my life became larger. The New House is almost a major character in my story. I am a product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs in indoor silences, attics explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes, and the noise of the wind under the tiles. Also of endless books. My father bought all the books he read and never got rid of them. There were books in the study, books in the drawing room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds reflecting every transient stage of my parents' interest, books readable and unreadable, books suitable for a child and books most emphatically not. Nothing was forbidden me. In the seemingly endless rainy afternoons I took volume after volume from the shelves. I had always the same certainty of finding a book that was new to me as a man who walks into a field has of finding a new blade of grass. Where all these books had been before we came to the New House is a problem that never occurred to me until I began writing this paragraph. I have no idea of the answer.

—C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, ©1955

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