**Infectious Reading**

The Minneapolis Public Library in the 1950s stood on Hennepin Avenue near Tenth, just across from Gmitro’s Ham’N’Eggs and within sight of the Orpheum Theater. The place looked like a monument: pleasingly solemn, venerable, five stories high, a pristine imperturbable eyesore. Constructed of Minnesota red sandstone, it gave an impression of thick-walled permanence—an atomic blast couldn’t have blown it away, I used to think. (The wrecker’s ball finally got it.)

The first time I stepped inside, I went with my brother Tom, whose idea it had been to show me the place. He parked his Olds, valued at $120, two blocks away, and left it there unlocked. At the library’s main entrance, you had to step down into a sort of well just below the sidewalk level to get in. I loved the place immediately. It was overheated, as if for people who never exercised. The old books with their aging paper...
made the interior smell like a bakery. After I stomped my snowy shoes in the foyer, my brother and I ambled past the checkout desks with their clicking Recordak machines making microfilm records of all the transactions, into a large room filled with blond-wood drawers. I had never seen a card catalogue that large before, and I found it hard to believe that each card represented a book in the library.

In the next room over, I carefully removed from the shelves a book about superheterodyne radios—my plans for adulthood included becoming a television and radio repairman who made house calls—and then we trudged up the circular stairs to the fourth floor, where there was a large and somewhat disorganized science exhibit on permanent display that included a stuffed lamprey, a rather cut-rate-looking mummy, and a model of the solar system. You'd go into a darkened room and gaze at the plaster-and-paste planets illuminated with ultraviolet light, and the starch in your shirt would start to glow, and you'd feel, standing there clutching your book about radio repair, just like an alien, weird and purple and stylish.

By the time I was thirteen I had perfected my reading posture. I had developed a method of slouching down in a chair so radically that my book, that fort of paper and glue and cloth, guarded my face. No one could see me when I was reading. They still can't. In those days I sat in chairs with my back down on the cushion, so that my torso was parallel to the floor. Only my head was propped up, and of course it was hidden behind the book. In the chair, I was a low rider. My mother thought that this method of reading would ruin my posture. She worried that I was becoming antisocial, that I would become one of those sad-looking run-down boys whom healthy girls would shun.

As it turned out, I had a large and eager appetite for trash.

Hemingway once claimed that his favorite book as a child was Jeffrey Farnol's *The Broad Highway*. Myself, I liked books about hot-air balloons and animals, but I wasn't really bookish until puberty arrived, and then I read art and garbage as consolation and stimulant, soaking it all up. In those days almost every novel seemed quite adequate. I liked them better, though, if they were voluptuously gloomy, or voluptuous and gloomy. *The Return of the Native* seemed like a perfect book to me, full of wounded stricken characters with all their eerie clumsiness and fatal calamities on display. In that novel, people are painted over with a red dye of sorrow. To quote a phrase used by the Quakers, the book spoke to my condition. You could also buy good novels in the paperback rack at the drugstore, and that's where I obtained Davis Grubb's *The Night of the Hunter* and J. R. Salamanca's *Lilith*, two books that made me want to be a writer. The first was about losing one's father and ending up in the hands of crazy people (my story exactly), and the second was about misplaced and probably crazy love, and both of them were written in a carefully wrought baroque-hypnotic style. They dazed me, those books.

I didn't want to become bookish and owlish, so I lifted weights and joined the wrestling team and pretended that the world as given to us was satisfactory, which, because the world isn't satisfactory, made me a hypocrite and unpredictably moody and a sort of manic-depressive athlete. All my efforts in the direction of the physical and material dimensions of my life seemed to fall short, but, armed with these other, more fugitive, psychic qualifications, I managed to become bookish anyway. I slouched in my chair and glowered and read all the time. I really don't know much about Davis Grubb (he died several years ago, and the only person I've ever met who knew him said that he looked rather like a large human frog), but I want to honor his memory here. Others can claim the truly
great—Tolstoy and Shakespeare and Dante—as their childhood and adolescent inspirations. I claim Grubb. I can't read his books anymore, but they were the first ones that successfully spellbound me.

A ridiculous picture: a boy, lifting weights in the basement, takes breaks between sets of bench presses and biceps curls to read an American gothic-lyric novel by a man who looks like a frog. *The Night of the Hunter*, the novel he is reading, has at its center a luckless boy and the sister whom he must take care of and watch out for. My first novel, *First Light*, has at its center a brother and his sister, whom he thinks he must take care of and watch out for. Funny coincidence. You take your inspirations where you find them. About a year after *First Light* was published, I realized that I had embedded *The Night of the Hunter* inside it. That book infected me; it was infectious. These days, the sight of a kid, any kid, nose stuck in a book, is a reminder of that moody and solemn time of my life when I stepped out of one world—this one—into another, the parallel universe of literature, and felt that it welcomed me.

Food was the potent center of my grandmother's life. Maybe the immense amount of time it took to prepare meals during most of her life accounted for her passion. Or it may have been her years of work in various kitchens on the hill and later, in the house of Justice Butler; after all, she was a professional. Much later, when she was dead and I went to Prague, I came to feel the motto I knew her by best—*Come eat*—was not, after all, a personal statement, but a racial one, the *cri de coeur* of Middle Europe.

Often, on Sundays, the entire family gathered for dinner at her house. Dinner was at 1 P.M. My grandmother would have preferred the meal to be at the old time of noon, but her children had moved their own Sunday dinner hour to the more fashionable (it was felt) 4 o'clock, so she compromised and liked to do in a