

Chapter 1 - Crystal City

I come from Crystal City, Missouri, a small town on the bank's of the Mississippi River, thirty-six miles south of St. Louis. My parents, Warren and Susie Bradley, married late in life. He was forty-three and she was thirty-five when I was born, and my arrival surprised them. I am their only child. My father had moved to Crystal City in 1912 with his mother and two sisters, after the family home in Ironton burned down and his father, who had run a general store there, died of cancer. To help support the family, he quit high school at age sixteen and went to work for the St. Louis-San Francisco Railroad. He sold tickets, loaded baggage, and kept track of the train schedules. At night, at a big oak table, he would sit with a sharp pencil and a crane-necked lamp, taking messages from the telegraph line. Morse code became the only language other than English that he would ever learn. He said, "Once you know how to take down the code, you have learned how to concentrate." At age twenty, he went to work at the local bank, in a job that entailed, as he would later say, "shining pennies." Slowly he advanced to assistant cashier, cashier, and then president, acquiring stock along the way, until by 1942 he had controlling ownership of the Crystal City State Bank (now owned by the Boatman's National Bank of St. Louis).

Ever since I was a young child, my father's health was the family's number-one priority. He lived every day with a painful, calcified arthritis of the lower spine. I never saw him drive a car, throw a ball, or tie his shoes. I never knew him to sleep longer than six consecutive hours. He could walk, but only on hard, even surfaces, and never for a distance much farther than the two long blocks from our house to the bank. My mother and I would dress him, tie his shoes, attach his suspenders, and pick up his newspapers from the floor. The world below his thighs and above his head was totally inaccessible to him.

Books about non-Western medicine and positive thinking dotted his library shelf. He had high blood pressure, so we radically changed the family diet. He had a gall-bladder operation, from which no one thought he would recover. He had intestinal problems, which he treated by eating Black Strap molasses. The stress of daily existence he handled with bourbon and water two per day and a wintertime vacation in Palm Beach, which he had first visited in 1928, when it was little more than a glorified sand dune. These visits lengthened from two weeks to two months as his career prospered. "If I get a phone call from the bank, I've failed," he would say. "Vacations are for relaxation, not business." He sat on the beach in his white wooden folding chair every day from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., protected from the wind by a blue canvas cabana. After a shower, he took a nap, had a drink, and read the newspapers until dinner. He perfected the art of immobile relaxation, practicing it with the single-mindedness of a professional golfer facing a ten-foot putt.

My father lived for the bank and for his family. He walked to work every morning at 8:15 and back every evening at 5:15. Often he came home for lunch. He served as treasurer of the school board for thirty years, but he never went to a meeting. He rarely attended any events in town, other than my Little League baseball games in summer, my school basketball games in winter, and (although he was suspicious of religion) Sunday-morning services at Grace Presbyterian Church.

Small-town banking was a trust-based profession. When there were panic runs in the early thirties, my father stacked up cash in the bank's window, so depositors could see that the bank was solvent. People came to my father with their money problems as they would go to a doctor for their health problems. His proudest achievement was that throughout the Great Depression he never foreclosed on a single homeowner. He felt he could work with people, help them manage, carry them for a while. He had a clear sense of ethics and lived by a rigid code of conduct. If you missed a loan repayment without a good reason, you became a different kind of person to him. Modest and reserved personally, and deeply affected by the

Depression professionally, he believed that risk in anything should be avoided at all costs.

My mother, a former schoolteacher and the daughter of a devout Methodist, was energetic, churchgoing, and civic-club attending. She was born in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, not far from the Arkansas border. Her father, Samuel Howard Crowe, was a salesman for Old Judge coffee, along a route from St. Louis to Little Rock, and he did very well at it. He wore a big black Stetson hat, told hundreds of jokes to his customers, and played seven musical instruments. When my mother was nine years old, he moved his wife and their six children to Riverside, a four-story, twenty-two-room Victorian mansion of brick and cut stone which sat on thirteen acres of barns and orchards overlooking the Mississippi River near Crystal City, just north of Herculaneum. I never knew him. He burned to death in a car crash on his way home from visiting my parents when I was eighteen months old. (He told my parents that he would pay for my college if they named me Samuel Howard, after him, instead of William Warren. But my father could never be bribed, not even by his father-in-law.)

My mother graduated from Central Methodist College, where for four years she dated the star football player. She became a fourth-grade teacher in Brentwood, a suburb of St. Louis. Thirty years after she quit teaching, full-grown strangers would appear at our door to express their appreciation and respect for Miss Crowe. At my father's funeral in 1994, one of her former students, who was dying of cancer, showed up to convey his sympathy and take inspiration from her one last time. As the daughter of a disciplinarian, she insisted on protocol and performance in her only child. On many an afternoon, I was called into the living room to say hello to her bridge club and otherwise demonstrate my manners. "Sir" or "ma'am" was how I invariably addressed an adult. Her conversation with my teachers after a PTA meeting focused more on my deportment than on my academic performance.

To my mother, pain was something to rise above. "Look at what happened to your father," she would say. "He just gave in to pain." She believed that endless energy and the human will could conquer any situation, and she also believed that activity was an acceptable substitute for thought: I therefore took lessons in piano, trumpet, French, swimming, basketball, boxing, and the French horn. My father said no to dancing lessons ("Babe Ruth didn't have dancing lessons"). My mother to this day says that I would have had better coordination as a basketball player if only I had taken ballet.

My mother always wanted me to be a success. My father always wanted me to be a gentleman. Neither wanted me to be a politician.

When I was growing up in Crystal City, it was a town of 3,492 people. Today it has topped 4,000. Back then, most of the men in town worked in the Pittsburgh Plate Glass factory. At its peak, PPG employed more than four thousand people in its Crystal City plant; they came from all over Jefferson County. The company owned many of the houses in town until the late 1940s, when it asked my father to sell its holdings to the townspeople.

The first sign of Double at the factory came in the late 1950s, when there was a lengthy strike. I remember crossing the arched concrete bridge over the railroad tracks on my way to school and seeing hundreds of angry men listening to speeches by union leaders. The men wanted higher wages and better working conditions. They got them, but a few years later the union accepted the new "float" process of making plate glass—a process that had just been imported from England and would reduce the size of the workforce. In the 1970s and 1980s, the plant continued to downsize. Crystal City's fresh white silica sand, which inspired the word "crystal" in the city's name, and its proximity to rail and river transportation no longer counted for much; new industrial processes had been introduced in plants elsewhere. Pittsburgh Plate Glass finally closed the factory in 1992, after more than one hundred years of operation, and today with the giant industrial buildings torn down and weeds covering the vacant land, it is as if someone has removed the photos of

my childhood from the family album.

While I was growing up, I had several brushes with politics. My first political memory is of listening to my father denounce Ed Eversole, the local Democratic kingpin. Eversole had at various times been county prosecutor and circuit judge. He manipulated county politics from his law office above the Miller Theater, on Main Street in Festus, the other half of what was self-importantly known as the Twin Cities. At night, the glass-speckled sidewalk in front of the Miller glittered in the light from the marquee. During the day, in front of the door that led to the second floor, the sidewalk was flat and plain, like the entrance to a trap should be.

Ed Eversole had a capacious face with a large nose, reddened cheeks, and eyes that were often bloodshot. He gave the profession of politics an air of intrigue and corruption. Around the Bradley house, he was thought to have been in cahoots with a bank competitor of my father's who later went to jail.

Ed and his wife, Nancy, did not have children, and they often professed a relative's interest in me. Nancy sang solos in the Grace Presbyterian Church choir. My father liked her voice. My mother thought she was a pleasant person. But Nancy's personality and talent couldn't overcome her husband's calling in the eyes of my father. My father was a Republican. But he was more apolitical than partisan, taking a dim view of politics. Politics for him was personified by local Democrats such as Ed Eversole, who he felt cheated people out of what was due them. Throughout the Depression, a picture of Herbert Hoover hung on my father's office wall, even though in later years he admitted that he had been wrong about Franklin Roosevelt, and that at a moment of great international crisis FDR, far from promoting socialism, had saved capitalism. Ultimately, Richard Nixon and Watergate drove my father to become an independent. He saw his grand old party acting just like he thought the local Democrats did – corrupted by power that rightly belonged to the people.

One November evening in 1948, when I was five years old, I sensed that something special was happening, because my parents were preparing to give a sizable party, which they had never done before. It was election night: Truman against Dewey for the presidency of the United States. My father wanted a Dewey victory; in fact, he had agreed to be an elector for Dewey. The celebration was in anticipation of his actually taking his instructions from the voters and casting his elector's vote for a president. But as the night wore on and I sat listening to the returns with my back against the big floor radio, the mood turned somber. Slowly our guests left. The iced champagne bottles remained corked. Truman had held on to the presidency, duplicating his 1940 run for re-election to the Senate: once again, he had come charging from behind by emphasizing his record and his plans to help working people.

In 1952 and 1956, I was my grade school's leading supporter of Dwight Eisenhower for president against Adlai Stevenson, the Democrat. Although my father had preferred Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, he stayed with the Republican nominee. On Election Day, I wore to school a shirt full of Republican political buttons. The one I liked most changed as you moved past it, from the "I Like Ike" slogan to a picture of the smiling candidate. My best friend, whose father was an active trade unionist at PPG, supported Stevenson with a passion equal to mine for Ike. Apart from the fact that we were walking in the political footprints of our fathers, what most struck me about the race was that both candidates were bald. I wondered whether anyone with hair would ever run for president.

My Aunt Elizabeth — or "Bub," as I called her — ran for Jefferson County assessor in 1960 on the Republican ticket. When she became a candidate, she was serving on the Herculaneum school board and made her living by operating a hamburger shop across from the high school. She ran for assessor because she personally disliked the Democratic incumbent. Being assessor was not as important to her as beating him, or, better yet, tarring him. She had virtually no campaign funds — just a mouth full of caustic com-

ments. The county was 60 percent Democratic. Still, she ran. Our spirits soared one Saturday morning in October as we draped three cars with bright-colored crepe paper, armed ourselves with signs, and set off on a countywide caravan of horn blowing and sign waving. My aunt thought the caravan might make the difference. The caravan was fun, but she got 40 percent of the vote.

The only time Crystal City High School ever allowed a television set into the school-library study hall was for the inauguration of John Kennedy. I was a high-school senior then, and still my father's son politically. Nixon had been my candidate. I had watched the Nixon-Kennedy debates, but I understood very little of what was said about the issues. My life was playing basketball, choosing a college, and doing well enough in school to have a choice. As I watched the inauguration, the thing that hit me was not the prospect of a new president, or the soaring delivery of 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.' Instead, it was the vulnerability of the old men in the ceremony: the poet Robert Frost, who struggled against the glare of sun and snow to read a poem dedicated to his fellow New Englander, and Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston, who fought the wind that blew his script as he offered the inaugural prayer, and whose red hat and flowing cloak reminded people that America now had a Catholic president. Frost and Cushing seemed to be passing the torch to this young man, and in their vulnerability to snow and wind and age reminded us that even this forty-three-year-old president would someday grow old.

When I was a senior at Princeton and asked my father whom I should talk to about entering politics, he advised me to consult Ed Eversole. I made the appointment, and went to see the kingpin late one winter afternoon in his office above the theater. It was a sparsely appointed, rather shabby office, with little evidence that any work actually went on there. He sat behind his desk in a three-piece suit, just as he sat on Sunday mornings across the aisle from my father in the last pew of the Presbyterian church. He told me what many others would tell me in the years ahead. If I wanted to get into politics, I had to start at the bottom. Run for city council, he said, and then try for county office. He implied that he could be helpful, but he didn't say that he would be. After all, I was the son of the town's most prominent Republican. Notwithstanding my declared intention of becoming a Democrat, he behaved toward me as I imagined the head of one organized crime family might behave toward the son of his rival. There would be other political bosses as I made my way through politics the Pendergasts, Tweeds, and DeSapios of history books, the Lerner, Kennys, and Errichettis of New Jersey. Each of them wielded more power than Ed Eversole, but to me none of them would be as intimidating as he had been, sitting behind his desk in his lair above the Miller Theater.

Crystal City was a multiethnic, multiracial company town. When Little League started there in 1952, it was racially integrated; after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the schools followed. There were no problems, chiefly because PPG's college-educated, enlightened engineers dominated the school board. The school district had high standards, and the families in the town encouraged the academic success of their children. When it came to racial issues, the rest of Missouri wasn't always that way. For many years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the color of your skin continued to impose limits on your possibilities if you were black. I remember staying in a run-down hotel in Joplin during a Little League playoff, because the better hotels wouldn't take our black players. I remember traveling as a teenage player in the American Legion baseball league to New Madrid, in the bootheel — the part of Missouri that protrudes into Arkansas — and being refused service at a restaurant there because our catcher and a left fielder were black. And I remember Alex Maul, the bank's black janitor, who did so much for us as my father's spinal arthritis worsened. With my mother's help, Alex set up my first basketball goal ("Your father used to play baseball before he got arthritis, not basketball — why basketball?"). When my mother insisted that Alex teach me how to box, just as he did for the kids who fought in the Golden Gloves competition, he showed me how to punch the speedbag ("Make it sing"). I took over his duties as bank janitor each summer during his vacation, and he taught me the mysteries of wet mopping ("Keep the stands spread wide").

Crystal City's families — the Vacarros, Auddifreds, La Prestas, Pouliezoses, LaRoses, Ryans, Picarellas, Goldmans, Shapiros, Potsterioffs, Salvos, and Magres — had come to America from all over the place. There was always the odd racist joke or ethnic slur, but somehow the fault lines of the town weren't laid out that way. The violent stories of my youth had more to do with high-school rivalries (Herky-Crystal, Festus-Crystal) and class conflict ("Let's get the banker's son") than with race or ethnicity. As my father always said, "The color of your skin doesn't predict whether you'll save money or pay your bills."

In March 1992, I agreed to speak at a campaign ice-cream social in Crystal City for Dick Gephardt, who was then the majority leader of the House of Representatives. As I drove into town, I noticed that old Highway 61-67 was now Truman Boulevard, but it still had only the one stoplight of my youth. Sam Temperato's first Dairy Queen, which my father had financed (Sam now has seventy-one of them), was still there, and so was Gordon's Stoplight Drive-In. The First Baptist Church still stood on the corner, with the Sacred Heart Catholic Church up on the hill behind it. A mall had replaced the American Legion baseball field. Interstate 55 now flanked the southwest side of town, and another giant mall separated it from the old highway. The ice-cream social was to take place in the VFW hall, out by the town's landing strip; you couldn't call it an airport, really — there were no runway lights and no control tower. One night in the early seventies, I had come close to dying at that airstrip. I had chosen to fly back from a political meeting in the botheell through a thunderstorm, in a single-engine plane. The lighting flashed around us, the thunder cracked, and torrents of rain streamed past the windows. The plane was thrown up and down like a ball bouncing on the floor. As we headed in for a landing, the pilot couldn't see the runway and had to rely on his memory to locate it. I still thank God that he remembered right. Gephardt's staff expected a hundred people at the social, and three hundred showed up. I was pleased and surprised by how many old friends were there: Alex Maul and his wife, Margaret; Boston Richards, my Little League coach; Jerry Ryan, my sixth-grade teacher and grade-school basketball coach; Arvel Popp, my high-school basketball coach; Mae Hunt, the secretary of the glassworkers' union for thirty years; Donny Howard, a bully who had beaten me up in second grade.

Shaking hands and signing autographs, I felt a certain loss. My parents were old and their health was failing. For the last twenty years, they had lived in Palm Beach and returned to Missouri only for the summer months, to escape the Florida heat. This year they wouldn't even be doing that. They were too frail; my mother's emphysema and my father's growing weakness made the trip unthinkable. It was as if our family's Missouri life had ended. The old friends seemed older. Coach Popp had emphysema, too. Alex Maul was fragile and slow-moving, and so were my mother's friends from the bridge club, the golf course, and the Grace Presbyterian Church.

I was a politician, speaking on behalf of another politician, as I had hundreds of times in my fourteen years in national politics. But this event was different. These were the people I had spoken in front of as a teenager, in church or at a high-school assembly or a civic club. Now I felt as if I were seeing some of them for the last time. Jerry Ryan handed me a note critiquing my speech: "You need better posture; your points don't follow logically." Others came up to shake hands. One man said, "I bet you don't remember me."

I said no, I didn't.

He identified himself. I said I was pleased he had come to support Dick and to hear me speak.

"I didn't come for that," he said. "I don't have enough money to eat these days. I came for the free ice cream."

The big city makes you feel "behind" if you come from a small town. When I played high-school basket-

ball, the challenge was to show the world that we could compete against the big-city schools. I never liked being called a hick. I never liked being looked down on by players I had just beaten, only because I came from a small town. My father wasn't rich compared with big-city bankers. My house wasn't big by suburban standards; my family wasn't educated by intellectual standards; my relatives weren't worldly by cosmopolitan standards. I didn't exactly have a chip on my shoulder, but I felt I had something to prove: that I could win, that I was as good as other people. These feelings ran deep for many years — before I came east, before I won my share, before I saw the individuals beneath the expensive suits and the academic tweeds.

I ache on occasion for the certainty and familiarity of small towns. I view urban America with provincial alarm as well as with a certain provincial awe and exhilaration. Main Street shapes my reaction to K Street and Wall Street, in subtle and powerful ways. That's just who I am. Even after ten years of playing professional basketball for the New York Knicks and living most of those years in New York City and more than twenty years in New Jersey and Washington, I still have impulses that are rooted in my adolescence, when I was part of a high-school class of ninety-six in a town with one spotlight.

I have flown over Crystal City many times on my way to other places. Usually, I can see the bluffs of Crystal Heights to the north and Buck Knob to the south, lining the Missouri side of the river like praetorian guards. These are the bluffs I crawled along as a kid, whose caves challenged young boys to find them and enter the dark without running into bats, snakes, spiders, or foxes. Along the base of the bluffs I would find fossils of carboniferous ferns and arrowheads from the Osage and Kaskaskia tribes. Beneath the bluffs are railroad tracks that parallel the river. I would walk along them with my German-born stepgrandfather, who had married my father's mother after my grandfather died. He told me stories about his childhood in Germany, with its corporal punishment from disciplinarian teachers; we drank from a spring that trickled down from the limestone bluff, and he carried a .22-caliber rifle and a box of .22 longs, with which we shot at logs in the river. On the paths from the railroad tracks up to the caves sat the occasional bum, the last representative of the army of hoboes who rode the empty boxcars during the Depression. Years ago, in the early 1970s, I almost bought a house on one of these bluffs, about ten miles south of Crystal City. Life changed, and the house wasn't bought, and my attention moved from the bluffs along the Mississippi to the Jersey Shore.

In the bottomland between the bluffs along the river is Hug Farm. As a kid, I used to do cross-country training there in the fall, before basketball practice began. I ran from my home past the city's water-filtration plant, and onto a gravel road along the cracked mud fields, through the cottonwood trees to the edge of the Mississippi. There, before I ran back, I would stop for a few minutes and watch the river flow. No one swam in the river. The whirlpools made it too dangerous. On the very rare occasions when it froze over, one of my uncles would sometimes venture out onto the ice.

In the early 1970s, PPG sold Hug Farm to me and a friend. I keep my share of it for sentimental reasons. There is no house on the property, only the foundations of one that burned down many years ago. The levee offers little protection from the floods, which come every four or five years. The brother of one of my Little League teammates farms the land, and he shares the proceeds with my partner and me. Until 1992, my father handled all the details of the farm — it gave him something to do after his retirement from the bank - but then he went blind and I had to step in.

Every time I'm in Crystal City, I drive down the alley behind City Hall, just west of Hug Farm, or to the parking lot of the town library, just north of it. I get out, look the property over, and estimate the acreage in soybeans or corn. When I bought the farm, I knew I was buying a permanent place in Crystal City. From time to time, somebody shows an interest in buying the property, but I doubt I will ever sell it, because of its powerful place in my memory.

To stand alone next to the river is a special kind of solitude. You can feel the incredible power and sense of possibility that no doubt struck the explorers who came upon this river and these bluffs more than four hundred years ago. The wind rushes through the cottonwood trees and the currents lap the shore. The water looks thick and muddy with upstream topsoil. It carries giant logs from the north. It transports the man-made residue of tin cans and plastics scoured from half a continent. In the spring, its rising waters deposit part of its richness on farms such as Hug and then it recedes, resuming its meandering path south to New Orleans. By August, the sloughs dry up and occasionally dead carp lie stinking in the sun. One mile east sits the bottomland of Illinois, separated from Missouri by the treacherous eddies of what Native Americans called the Great Water.

The Mississippi River has always been a powerful metaphor for me, not just a physical divide but a historical one. When you grow up along its banks, its history lives, and you absorb it before you can interpret it. Thirteen miles from Crystal City is De Soto, named for the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto, who died in 1542 on the western bank, the first European to explore the southern Mississippi. Within a sixty-mile radius of Crystal City are Ste. Genevieve, Kaskaskia, and Cahokia — outposts established by compatriots of Jolliet and Marquette and the great La Salle, who claimed the river's entire length for France but failed to interest the French crown in exploring the opportunities offered in the Valley of the Great Water.

When I was a student at Princeton, the first art paper I ever wrote was on the work of a Missouri artist named George Caleb Bingham, who painted boatmen involved in trade on the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. These were rogues and adventurers, unlike the families who had pooled their possessions and set out in flatboats of varying quality, braving outlaws and Indians, on their way to a distant destination where land would be cheap and fertile. Though the naïveté and majesty of the settlers' journey inspires admiration, it was the boorishness and audacity of the boatmen that captured my imagination. In his *Mighty Mississippi*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Missouri journalist Marquis Childs portrays them as American originals — “half horse and half alligator,” as the saying went. They floated down the river with relative ease, drinking whiskey, eating slabs of burned meat, playing the fiddle, dancing the jig, and whoring along the way. Coming back upstream was a different order of experience. It was as hard as work gets. Each man poled and pulled, sweating under the scorching sun to propel the boat and its tons of cargo north against the current. They used poles to push off the river bottom. They tied ropes to trees and tugged, or got off along the bank and shouldered the ropes to haul the boat upstream. Caleb Bingham caught these rivermen in countless paintings, such as *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, *Raftsmen Playing Cards*, *Watching the Cargo by Night*, and *Boatmen on the Missouri*. It was a time in American history when humankind and nature still seemed in harmony.

Floods are dramatic and biblical, evoking images of power and devastation. They reveal us as impotent in the face of their violence. In the *Feat* flood of 1993, one and a half million cubic feet of water flowed past Hug Farm every second. The water poured over the Hug Farm levee, across the Missouri Pacific Railroad tracks, and into the high-school football field, where it crested several yards above the crossbars of the goalposts. It backed up Plattin Creek and flooded under six feet of water the stoplight intersection of my youth, which lay two miles from the river's edge. The Baptist church was sandbagged. The Chevrolet dealer was sandbagged. Gordon's Stoplight Drive-In and the Dairy Queen were abandoned to the rising waters. The bank's new building on Truman Boulevard was sandbagged, but the water kept coming. Eventually, an enormous crane was sent down from St. Louis by bank headquarters, and the safe-deposit boxes were removed to higher ground. The post office didn't fare so well; the flood nearly covered it. The flood of 1993 caused twelve billion dollars' worth of damage to crops, levees, and structures along the length of the river.

But for all their Wagnerian drama, floods come and go in a natural cycle. Far more dangerous is the contin-

ual soil erosion in the Mississippi Valley. The virgin forests were nearly gone by the early twentieth century: as much as half the forest area of the North was burned over. The Mississippi and its tributaries have been scooping up precious topsoil ever since. Without the forests, the flood levels are higher. The river receives much more in topsoil washing down the tributaries than it deposits on the bottomlands along the main stream. In 1935, President Roosevelt's Mississippi Valley Committee found that annual damage from soil erosion just on the western half of the Mississippi drainage basin was twenty times the losses in the same area caused by annual floods. Yet we continue to worry about floods more than we do about soil erosion.

In the late nineteenth century, railroads under the control of Eastern banking interests received large federal subsidies, and with the help of these public grants they displaced much of the river traffic. Although a Mississippi River Commission was created in 1879, it wasn't until the early 1930s that sizable federal spending backed it up. As the Depression deepened, the congressmen who represented districts along the rivers of the Midwest successfully pushed for spending huge amounts on flood-control projects and other river improvements along the Mississippi and its tributaries. Out of this commitment came the twenty-six locks and dams on the upper Mississippi and miles and miles of federal levees along the entire length from St. Paul, Minnesota, to New Orleans. In 1934, the Public Works Administration alone got over thirty-three million dollars for river work. But, as Mark Twain wrote, "Ten thousand River Commissions, with the mines of the world at their back, cannot tame that lawless stream, cannot curb it or confine it, cannot say to it, 'Go here,' or 'Go there,' and make it obey; cannot save a shore which it has sentenced; cannot bar its path with an obstruction which it will not tear down, dance over, and laugh at." These attempts to direct or control the Mississippi are testimony not so much to our technological acumen as to our arrogance. To subsidize river traffic in this way is to obligate taxpayers at great expense to wage a battle against the power of the Mississippi year after year. It is a battle that we will ultimately lose.

The river for Mark Twain symbolized freedom, defiance, and rebellion, in an age in which he thought that the petty and the narrow dominated life. For me, in an age shattered daily by sound bites and news on the hour, with abrupt shifts in the fortunes of whole nations, with continuity more difficult to find, the river and the bluffs above it came to represent permanence. They were always there, as they had been for thousands of years. They guaranteed a kind of stability. You could count on them to anchor your life.

Wherever I go and whatever I do, the experience of growing up in Crystal City travels with me. The memories are too deeply etched to fade. Things that happened in high school or even grade school seem to have happened only yesterday, and there are places in the town that still glow with the expectations of my youth. Even the old family battles resonate: I didn't return from Princeton and run the bank with my father; I "made a mistake" going to Princeton in the first place. Part of my mother wishes to this day that I had stayed in Missouri, gone to Mizzou (the University of Missouri), married my high-school sweetheart, and come back home.

I did not go back home. But in a sense, I also never left. I will always be as much from that small town between two limestone bluffs on the banks of the Mississippi as I am from anywhere.