Broken Glass

*(This was published in the Richmond Quarterly, 1982. My revisions are minor, but one of them, calling Leo's year after high school a "gap year," may be anachronistic, at least in the US. It's set back when there were phone booths! And no cell phones! No TV remotes! On the hospital floor where I worked, patients might stay for weeks; sometimes for months! My poem "The Older Boy" was inspired by the same snowball incident as I recount in this story. In real life no glass was smashed, no cars wrecked, but a driver did pull over, take our names, and scold us; the older boy with me did indeed die a few months later, of a heart attack, in the school gym.)*

1.

It was nine o'clock on a Tuesday morning, on a road overhung with mimosa. A fair, wiry boy in an open-necked shirt was forcing his bicycle up a hill, thrusting down on the pedals and twisting his body from side to side. It was not usually a busy road, but today a string of cars swung by, giving him a wide berth, until he crested the rise and his course steadied. The road began to curve left. He relaxed a moment, listening to his wheels whirr as he cruised into the dip.

An off-white VW Squareback was parked at a slight angle to the curb, the nose leaning out towards the road, the left wheel straddling the inner line of the bicycle lane. Engine silent, lights off. The young man took this in automatically, not realizing until afterward that he had noticed the car at all.

He had thought himself already past it when he felt the impact—with no sense even of seeing the door swing open. Suddenly, his right hand, on the handlebar, hit glass; his wheel rebounded off an invisible wall. Giving an involuntary, karate-style yelp, he stopped dead, perfectly balanced: a car window lay in smithereens at his feet. The girl in the driver's seat rolled up what remained of the shattered pane, watching expressionless as that too fell in pieces to the asphalt.

She climbed out and gave him a quick half-smile, tight-lipped. "You okay?"

He nodded. "I think so."

He was already off the bicycle, testing the brakes, peering along the line of the front wheel. "Bike seems fine too."

She laughed, if you could call her snort a laugh. It sounded more as if she was hawking up gunk. "Well, that's just great. Just great. Look, I'd better have your number and your address, just in case the insurance company gives me any crap."

He told her he was Leo Taschke, pronouncing the surname as distinctly as he could; the weight on the *T* made it sound like a sneeze. He spelled it out and her lips parted as she wrote it, in big print letter by big print letter. She was nut brown-haired and cute. Her nail polish was pale yellow. The cover of her pink notebook said *journal intime*. A man watching from an upstairs window poked his head out and called down.

"Hey, dude! You don't have to pay for it, you know. It was her fault."

"Gimme a break, Curtis," the girl yelled back, not turning her head. The man disappeared, brandishing a thumb at him and chuckling.

Leo Taschke put a hand up to his face and adjusted his glasses. She was older than him, but he thought no more than early twenties? And maybe an inch or so taller, though if she slouched a little and he straightened they could come out even. When she looked back up she caught him evaluating her; she sighed, pointedly. "Your hand's bleeding, Mr. Taschke." He looked at it in some surprise. All four fingers were splotched crimson. She sighed again, and shut the pink notebook. "Well, I guess you'll have to come in and wash it off. Damn it to hell."

Glass fell from the folds of his clothes. She hurried him through to the bathroom and thrust a washcloth and a box of band aids at him. "Shouldn't I have your phone number too, maybe?" he asked, not consciously intending a pass. But she stared at him with a clenched anger, shaking her head slowly. "No. I don't think so."

He followed her back out and cycled off. After two blocks he had to dismount. The damn thing might have looked all right, but the front wheel was catching against the brake-blocks.

2.

At the time of the collision Leo was on his way to Mr. Kent's house. The two had met at the hospital, Mr. Kent as a patient, Leo as a nurses' aide. Leo was three months into a gap year between high school and university. The idea had been to take a break from the classroom while earning some useful money. Astonishingly, his parents supported the plan, hoping that dipping a toe in the real world—to enroll, later, as a more mature student, more independent and more self-confident—would prepare Leo to buckle down faster. And after all, there would be years of intense study before him if he wished to become a doctor. Leo actually had other aspirations, although he didn't let on. The first gap year was now near the cusp of a second; still living at home, no car, very few indulgences, he was spending almost nothing; he would quit this job next spring, to backpack through Europe. After eighteen months of hospital work he could declare with authority that medicine was not the field for him. Meanwhile, he did his job just fine; he even found it interesting. But he kept a clear distance between it and his inner self.

Today was his day off. There was no real urgency about arriving right on time at the Kents' home, but he was still two miles away from them, and he was going to be very late. Passing a phone booth, he stopped to call. Telephones made Mrs. Kent very nervous for some reason; she so hated using them that she came across as a different person, brusque and sarcastic and mad as hell. "Oh, that's just fine," she snapped. "Get here when you can." Well, not completely different; it was how she spoke to her husband, sometimes.

He made a small detour to park the damaged bike in his aunt's back yard. "Same old Leo," she chuckled when he described the accident for her. "Would you like a ride?" But he refused the offer. In truth, he was glad of the walk. Along the railroad tracks, the honeysuckle was beginning to show yellow, twining up out of the undergrowth with its thin scents spiking the air. He jogged alongside for a while, tossing pebbles at old beer cans.

His thoughts were less of Mr. Kent than of Mr. Kent's old roommate on ward 4E, who had been one of those few patients Leo went out of his way to spend time with, as the nurses' aides were encouraged to do when they had any time to spare. He had made some minimal effort to make Mr. Kent feel included in the visits. The roommate was a retired English teacher named Frank Keegan, dying of cancer, who liked all kinds of poetry and helped Leo with his assignments for an evening class he was taking.

"I wouldn't trade places with you for anything," the man had said once, despite his sickness and the chemotherapy which had taken his hair. Or perhaps forgetting about them for a moment, as they looked together at a poem about being young and in love, and Leo confessed how bad he was at flirting, and you know, all that kind of stuff. "It gets easier," said Mr. Keegan. "I've seen generations of adolescents. All boppy and full of vim, but talk to them when they come back to visit and they'll say, 'God, I was so messed up back then.' It may be the worst age there is in life."

"It's not that bad."

"You're nineteen? You may be through the worst of it. That mess of new sensations and strange wild emotions and not knowing how to cope. Life getting you every time. You haven't a prayer." And then he poked Leo in the ribs, as if he were kidding with him—peering into his face and winking. But he wasn't just kidding. He liked trying to draw Leo out, to get him talking about himself. And for whatever reason, Leo did so. Mr. Kent would lie there and listen, his mouth open and his eyes half-closed, interjecting his own commentary from time to time and chuckling.

Once (by this time Mr. Kent had been discharged, and the room's other bed was temporarily empty) Mr. Keegan had asked Leo how he felt about his patients; did their condition upset him? Many were receiving extended treatment, often palliative treatment, with small hope of recovery; they would die on the ward, or leave it only for the ICU or for hospice, to die there instead. Leo confided that usually he did not. "*Some*times—the ones I remember as normal when they were admitted. Still all hopeful. Before they *knew*." (Mr. Keegan knew. He seemed to have accepted it though.) "But I look at Mr. Kent, for example, and honestly? I can't say I feel much at all."

The English teacher nodded. "I think that's pretty normal. And mostly pretty healthy. You can't let everything touch you; you'd be a wreck. Just as long as you don't shut everything out now. I've seen people do that too. They put this glass wall between them and the world, to create some distance from whatever's difficult. To make the experience of it easier."

"I do that?" There seemed something faintly romantic about the charge, like being thought dangerous or peculiar. Leo considered the possibility for a moment. "No, I don't think I do, though. *Here*, maybe, a little, in the hospital. But which you think is healthy, right?"

"Sure, most of the time. But be careful about it, Leo. If that sheet of glass gets too thick—"

"Metaphor alert!" This was one of their jokes. Mr. Keegan had winced at the heavy-handed metaphors in a poem they'd looked at. And here he was about to inflict one on Leo!

"Good for you. Metaphor alert. Nevertheless. In case of emergency, smash glass."

Leo laughed out loud. Mr. Keegan looked a little offended. Leo explained.

"No, it's not that. I'm sorry, Mr. K. It's just that I'm always smashing glass. Like literally! In my family I'm known for it. When I was ten I tripped over a lamp cord and brought down a cabinet full of china. I've hit a golf ball through a window, dropped I think three separate mirrors, stepped on a friend's sunglasses. Just last month I slept on my spectacles and cracked them. It's like an affliction."

"Wow, son," said Mr. Keegan. "I was trying to work the conversation back round to girls and seeing if you're doing any better at letting your heart get broken, but maybe we should rethink that. Maybe you'll be too good at breaking theirs."

Leo laughed some more, and Mr. Keegan laughed too, but the laugh turned into a cough. He stayed only two days more. By now dying was the only option, and he preferred to do that at home, or at least at his daughter's home. His granddaughter came to check him out, and of course Leo checked *her* out. She was honey-blonde and cute. But then Leo found most girls cute. She returned the next day with cards for the staff, from her grandfather, including one for Leo, inside which Mr. K. had written five lines of poetry, in a thin and spidery hand.

"I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight

I got from looking through a pane of glass

I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough

And held against the world of hoary grass.

It melted, and I let it fall and break."

The lines were taken from "After Apple-Picking," by Robert Frost. When Leo looked up the rest of the poem—he didn't completely understand it, but it was very haunting, and it seemed to be about death—he impressed himself by almost crying. He felt as though he were losing a father. About a month later, Mrs. Kent had telephoned to engage him as a private duty orderly. And now Mr. Keegan was dead, and Leo was following the railroad tracks to the house of his former roommate, the man for whom he had admitted he felt nothing.

He had told neither the English teacher nor anyone else of his most unsettling experience with broken glass; it still unsettled him. He had been in his first year of junior high; Jeffrey was in his fourth. Why were they together that day? He couldn't recall, but it wasn't usual—they weren't friends. It was January, and snowing, although not hard enough for school to have closed. He'd stayed late for some reason; by the time he strolled the two blocks home the sky was darkening with heavier snow and the approach of evening. He and Jeffrey were throwing snowballs—maybe they were there at the same time by pure chance, and just fell into companionship? In any case, each time Jeffrey switched targets, from a street sign to the license plate of a parked car to the plates of the slow stream of passing cars, Leo followed his lead. They threw for another fifteen minutes, ducking behind the tree trunks and darting out; mostly missing badly, but getting closer; neither talking much nor laughing. Methodically they packed the snow into balls and launched them at the chugging shapes, changing expressions neither when the missiles spattered against a back bumper or missed entirely, as they usually did, skidding across the far lane and fragmenting.

Leo was imitating the older boy, holding himself as Jeffrey did, grim and silent because Jeffrey was, scooping out several of the snowfalls at once, as Jeffrey did, squatting on his haunches until enough were gathered. Once, Jeffrey snorted "Damn" after a particularly wild miss; Leo soon missed wildly and snorted "Damn!" also, echoing his posture of disgust. It took awhile, but eventually the older boy scored a direct hit on a plate, and lifted both arms in triumph; almost immediately the younger boy did the same: he managed a direct hit; he raised high his two arms.

At this point, Jeffrey got visibly annoyed. Perhaps to put Leo in his place, to show him that he was just a dumb kid, he found a fist-sized stone and coated it with a thin layer of snow. He glanced over to see if Leo would step up to accept the challenge, and smirked when Leo didn't. Almost without looking, he hurled the rock into the road. Perhaps the greater weight made it soar; in any case it smashed into a car's side mirror and shattered it. The big Ford slid with an eerie quietness into the median. Jeffrey and Leo turned and fled.

No one, Leo discovered a few days later, had been hurt. Someone told his mom about a foreign man who had had to knock at a neighbor's door to call a tow-truck. The talk was more about immigrants and their bad English than the wreck; Leo shut himself in his room, unable to listen further. He and Jeffrey avoided each other from then on—until, just four months later, Jeffrey died, bizarrely, of a heart attack, right in the school gym. He was barely fifteen.

Remembering, not wishing to remember, Leo dropped the pebbles he was still carrying and began to sprint. The soles of his shoes were worn thin, and through them he could feel the stiffness of the wooden slats, the lumpen proddings of the pebble beds. His left sock rode low about his ankle, bunching under his instep, flexing and unflexing as he sprinted; then trotted, winded; then sprinted some more. Ball of the right foot, ball of the left foot, thumping them down on slats and pebbles, pebbles and slats, scuffing dust on the hems of his jeans.

3.

Mrs. Kent carried her weight awkwardly, swaying from side to side, tilting her head back as if someone were tweaking her hair. She was very short. "Oh, don't worry about being late," she reassured Leo, leading him into the living room. "We're just glad you're not hurt."

"Who'll have the seven years of bad luck?" her husband asked in his usual gruff whisper. "Her or Leo? Turn off that garbage, will you, someone."

Leo bent forward to jab at the TV switch and sat down. His patient raised a hand in brief salute. "Well, how you doing, Leo?"

"Pretty good, Mr. Kent. How about yourself?"

"I don't feel so hot, Leo. I feel terrible bad."

Mrs. Kent had said that he was weaker, but to Leo he seemed little changed: the slack jowls, the closed right eye, the hand trembling as it fingered the sheets: all was as before. And now the sudden chuckle, as if someone had made a joke. "Seven years bad luck," he repeated, and slowly the chuckle faded.

"Leo, I'd better get goin'. You can give him his bath at around three. Remember to wait a couple of hours after lunch. He hasn't had breakfast, so if you want to fix him something in a few minutes, I've left everything handy on the counter for you."

Leo came by for an hour twice a week to wash and shave Mr. Kent and check his vital signs. The entire household was always delighted to see him—the old couple grinning and chattering while their dog frisked about his legs. It was as if the pair could only locate their happier past selves with him as intermediary. They still bickered, raising their clipped voices like machine guns, scowling each other down, but always they would turn back to Leo and to their stories with the most serene of smiles. From their tone, the tales might have been idylls even when the memories were frankly tragic, even before and after a word of interruption, a careless movement brought them up harshly against the present. Leo wondered if left alone in this house they could bear the sight of each other; Mr. Kent, for that matter, was invariably disgusted to catch glimpses of himself, twisted across the face of the mirror as he struggled out of the tub. And yet it was to each other that they spoke, not really to Leo; whenever one of them was left alone with him they would fall silent. Mrs. Kent would offer coffee, fussing with cups and saucers until her husband called out "Ready!" from the bathroom; Mr. Kent would gaze over in the direction of his dog and exclaim "That Rufus!" Chuckling at nothing.

Today was different for two reasons: Leo was to stay maybe seven hours while Mrs. Kent ran errands; and he and Mr. Kent would be alone the whole time. What would they find to talk about? All at once—it it was physical, like the welling up of nausea—it came to Leo how little he wanted to be there. The depth of the feeling shook him, and he attempted to explain it away: smashing that window (he told himself) had unnerved him more than he could have expected. He daydreamed that the girl had smiled and offered him her number.

The kitchen was dark. The Kents' house was next to the railroad track, and a steep wooded bank blocked out the morning sun. There was a note on the refrigerator. Leo fetched out the OJ and read by the light of the open door. "Dear Leo, the lawyer is supposed to be calling me back. Tell him I can come to his office on your next weekday off, whenever that is; I'd like you to stay the whole day again, if you don't mind." He closed the door, switched on the hood light of the stove, and read it again. As he shook together the orange juice and the KCl (Mr. Kent was on a strict low sodium diet), Leo began to grow angry. His rage deepened as he tossed the bacon substitute, whipped the egg-mix. How could she presume on his good will like that? What was he, their servant? He undercharged them was the problem. They thought cheap meant at their beck and call. It was true he was at loose ends mostly, what with his friends graduated and gone and him living at home and the rest, but if the Kents were out of his damn life, just maybe he might find some time to learn how to be fucking nineteen. To be young. To have actual fun.

Sunlight broke over the wooded bank and cascaded through the window; dust motes swam in it like tadpoles. The quarry. Maybe those girls he'd met last summer were already back out there. And as for that diva in the Squareback, how did she dare get mad at him? Like it was his fault? If she had opened her door a split second later she would have sent him sprawling—in that traffic he might have been killed. He would find his way back to her apartment and make her pay to get the wheel straightened. He would be polite but he would be firm.

He brought in the food. Mr. Kent wiggled himself upright. The man's catalogue of complaints was quite unreasonable, it was almost comic: hypertension, bronchial issues, three heart attacks, one major stroke, a lung lost to cancer, a right eye that was virtually useless, two shambling puppet legs in search of strings. It was doubtful his body could survive the next assault upon it. Leo discovered that his usual mild pity (it was too uninvolved to be called compassion) had quite vanished. He felt only a dull impatience.

Mr. Kent tasted the food. "It needs salt, Leo," he said, looking the boy straight in the eye. Salt, of course, was sodium chloride. Mr. Kent was not allowed sodium. He had been warned that flat-out ignoring the restriction was what had brought on his stroke. If his wife had been there to hear she would have raised the roof. Would she have meant it, though? Didn't she as much as Leo, as much as her husband did, deserve to be free of all this? Leo hesitated, but not for long. He fetched the salt. The old man poured it all over his plate. Leo turned his back, not looking any more. He went into the bathroom and washed spilt egg-mix from his hands. Nothing would happen. One lousy meal couldn't kill him. Jesus, why would anyone give a damn if it did? Let the poor guy have an iota of pleasure before he died.

Only as he was toweling himself dry was Leo assailed by second thoughts. He hurried back out to the living room and reached out towards Mr. Kent's tray. "You'd better not finish that, Mr. K. I'll fix you another."

"Let it alone, son." Mr. Kent thrust out a protective arm of his own and the tumbler of KCl and orange juice went flying. Leo grabbed at it but it ricocheted off his bandaged fingers and struck the edge of the carpet, bouncing sideways onto the hard tile around the fireplace. A bite-sized chunk broke off at the rim. He gathered up the two pieces and fit them neatly in place; there was not a splinter missing.

"Look," he told his patient. "It's hardly broken at all. You could put it right back together."

"I'm sick of that lousy diet," Mr. Kent replied. But he sighed and stopped chewing. They paused for a while, both prepared now to concede; Leo still cradling the broken glass. "Let it alone, son. It's not worth mending. Not worth it all." Leo set the tumbler down on the tray; the snapped-off smaller fragment slipped like a beggar's coin inside the larger. Mr. Kent picked them up, with a sudden violence hurled them splintering into the grate, and began to sob. A thin, high whining came occasionally from his throat as he inhaled, but otherwise it was quite noiseless.

The boy was thinking, what do I do, what do I do? It struck him as the worst thing that had ever happened to him. After watching motionlessly for a few moments, however, he gathered himself and went to sit beside the old man, taking his left hand between his own two. It was a gesture he would normally have been too self-conscious to make, yet now it anchored him—it was a warmth to hold to, as his thoughts continued to runnel and toss like water.

He recalled Jeffrey and the snowballs, he saw again the VW window smash to slivers, he shook his head slightly at the mess of glass in the grate. A line from the Frost poem ran through his head like a song heard on the radio. *It melted, and I let it fall and break.* Thinking of the English teacher, the sense of loyalty and loss that had welled up in him then, he realized with some confusion how similarly he would be affected by Mr. Kent's death. How strange to feel that way even for him. Leo felt a flood of warmth and tenderness course through him, as if there were no separation between them, as if between bared souls nothing but kindred was possible. At the same time he was aware of himself observing it all quite coolly, running his fingers through the glittering connections, sniffing mystery and new sensation like cheap perfume.

And even, if he was honest, if he were to analyze it, like a poem or a story, not quite trusting it, perhaps? Aware of a skin of glass, barely there, but protecting him, between his grief for the two Mr. K.'s and him? They were both so sick, after all, and old; time might bring him to that hard end, but for now, the degree of Leo's compassion felt about right; it was real, but it would pass.

All this as he caressed the dying man's hand. Beneath the webbing of the skin, the veins were thick and blue. With his thumb Leo followed the line of the bones down from the knuckle to the wrist. He held him to him, delicately rocked and rocking, until the sobbing stopped, and he could leave to prepare the second breakfast.