



## Tenants of the House

by Michael Milburn



Illustration by D.G. Strong

“A famous writer used to live there.” My new neighbor gestured behind me at the house I had just bought. After the closing, my wife and I had brought our son over to show him the back yard with its playhouse and giant tree perfect for a tire swing. The weathered colonial on Kensington Road hadn’t been my first choice among the handful of houses we had looked at in Syracuse, but it appealed to my wife for its size, yard and location, and she had promised me the use of the renovated attic for my study. The famous writer himself had told me how he had finished and soundproofed that room, and worked happily there for years before moving to a larger house upon the birth of his third child.

The celebrity that my neighbor referred to was the fiction writer and memoirist Tobias Wolff, a professor at Syracuse University, where my wife, Mary, had just been hired to teach in the MFA Writing Program. Mary had met Toby in the late 1970s while earning her MFA at Goddard College’s low-residency program. When Syracuse offered her the job, Toby mentioned that his old house was on the market. He had no financial interest in our purchase, having moved two years earlier, but was happy to brief us on the neighborhood and recommend a local real estate agent. When we visited Syracuse to look at houses, he offered us the use of his new home as a base of operations.

Mary had thrived at Goddard, where Ellen Bryant Voigt, the founder of the MFA program, had assembled an extraordinary faculty of poets and fiction writers, a number of whom would go on to literary acclaim. Robert Hass, Louise Gluck, Richard Ford, Raymond Carver, Tobias and Geoffrey Wolff—I love to think of these writers, all still relatively obscure, mingling on the rural Goddard campus during the twice-yearly residencies. Most Goddard MFA candidates were adults with full-time jobs, and the bulk of the program was conducted through correspondence. But for ten days in the heat of August and the deep freeze of February, students and teachers lived, workshopped, partied and sometimes slept together at the Vermont campus.

Mary and I had met at a Goddard residency in 1980. I had audited a class with Ellen Voigt in college, and she had encouraged me to attend the summer session to see if I wanted to pursue a graduate degree. Toby had left the program for Syracuse by then, and Mary was in her final term. She and I began a relationship that led to her moving

to Boston, where I had taken a job in a small poetry library at Harvard after my graduation. We lived in Boston for nine years, during which time we married and had a son. In 1989, she was offered the tenure-track job at Syracuse, where I arranged to teach freshman composition while working on my writing.

Toby's role in our new lives in Syracuse was ironic; though that house-hunting visit represented my first official meeting with him, he and I shared a family connection that pre-dated either of our relationships with Mary. Toby's brother Geoffrey had married my first cousin, Priscilla Porter, when I was in my teens. I had attended their wedding in Narragansett, Rhode Island, on the oceanfront property where my mother's family congregated every summer. When I met Geoffrey, he had published two novels and was working as the book critic for *The Washington Post*; his conversation was full of casual references to contemporary books and writers. A budding writer myself, I was thrilled to have heard of the authors he mentioned, and to discover that some of them were his friends.

As impressed as I was by Geoffrey's literary glamour, his appearance in my family disoriented me. Most of my relatives were lawyers, doctors or bankers. My two oldest brothers had already followed my father into the law, the traditional profession for Milburns, so my devotion to poetry made me feel a bit like the family misfit. In addition, my poems were intensely personal, mining my childhood and my parents' fractious marriage, and I was loath to share or even discuss them at home. The reticent teenager who sat through family dinners was nothing like the confrontational self that I unleashed on the page. Writing was a record of my secret life, and Geoffrey's arrival felt like an unexpected visit from that realm.

My parents viewed Geoffrey as an interloper for different reasons. Both avid readers, they recognized his literary accomplishments, but this didn't stop them from disparaging him out of his hearing. My mother couldn't say his name without adding a withering reference to his beard, which branded him as a beatnik in her view, while my father questioned his social pedigree. I didn't know it at the time, but Priscilla's family was even more disapproving, and not behind Geoffrey's back either. In his memoir, *The Duke of Deception*, Geoffrey writes:

...I had met someone I wanted to marry, who wanted to marry me. Her parents did not approve, for many reasons. They had noticed dirt beneath my fingernails when I dined with them, they knew I had nothing to commend me other than a scholarship at a foreign university, they knew my father was a yardbird, and they believed I was a Jew.

Their daughter and I wished to prevail, and finally we did. But her parents were relentless in their opposition .... A member of Priscilla's family flew four hundred miles to tell her, a month before we were married, that if she didn't care herself about the consequences of a "mixed marriage," she should "think of the children." They'd never be welcome in Hobe Sound, or Delray, or some other place on the Atlantic coast off Florida.

Geoffrey prevailed in winning over my family, too. My parents may have clung to the belief that WASPs should only marry WASPs and practice traditional white-shoe professions, but they appreciated good writing too much not to respect Geoffrey. They read each of his books as soon as it appeared, and when my father discovered that Geoffrey not only possessed an imposing intellect, but shared his fondness for drinking and socializing, there was little left to condemn.

After Mary and I met, we quickly made the connection between my family and her Goddard mentors, Toby and Geoffrey. Mary had grown up in southeast Texas, where her father worked in an oil refinery. After we married, Geoffrey enjoyed giving her pointers on how to survive as the outlaw in-law in an aristocratic New England family. For me, however, Geoffrey was a different kind of role model, a serious artist amid Narragansett's moneyed summer population, someone that I could study for clues on how to carry myself as a writer. He represented the world I aspired to rather than the one I had inherited, a world in which writing was not just something to read at the beach or on the 8:02 to Penn Station, but a calling.

It was during one of those teenage summers that I first encountered Toby, though we were never introduced and I did not know what he looked like. I remember some of Geoffrey and Priscilla's friends giving catamaran rides at the Narragansett beach club,

and hearing afterward that this group had included Toby and Richard Ford, whose first novel I had just read. This made for another disorienting moment. Summer days at the club were a constant of my youth; I would lie with my book among a smattering of rich couples up from New York or Providence while a few yards away, across an invisible property line discreetly monitored by club stewards, the public beach teemed with humanity. So much of my poetry expressed my ambivalence about the trappings of privilege; to know that Richard Ford, a writer I admired, had not only witnessed me partaking of these, but partaken himself, was confusing to say the least.

I have always been intimidated in the presence of good writers. One of my duties in the Harvard library was to organize readings for prominent poets. Even around modest and unassuming ones such as Seamus Heaney I was unfailingly deferential. Sometimes Mary's former Goddard teachers would stay with us when they were in town. I remember Robert Hass quoting poetry over breakfast in our kitchen, and Raymond Carver attending a party that we gave. After greeting me at the door, Carver passed the evening in a cloud of pot smoke on our living room couch. Yet no matter how informal the circumstances of my meetings with these writers, or their behavior toward me, I treated them with the same reverence I felt for their poems and stories.

When I had the chance to get to know Toby in Syracuse, my deference hampered that relationship, too. Paul Griner, one of my colleagues in the composition program, had recently graduated from the Syracuse MFA program, where Toby had served as his adviser. Although Paul admitted to being in awe of Toby as a student, they had since become close friends, organizing play dates for their kids and playing together on the Syracuse faculty softball team. One day Paul invited me along to a game, and I briefly tried to envision myself cheering on Tobias Wolff as he approached the plate, then laughing with him over beers afterward. The scenario seemed improbable. Worried that my awkwardness would ruin everyone's good time, I declined the invitation.

I can pinpoint the moment that I began to admire Toby's writing. The year before I moved to Syracuse, I was paging through the literary journal *Ploughshares* in the library, and came across his short story "Sister." In the story, a woman's attempt to ingratiate herself with two men ends in embarrassment, causing her to reflect on the insular nature of human—particularly male—companionship. The story closes with her thinking of her brother, returning that day from a bird hunting trip with his friends. She imagines the men stopping at a bar on the way home, leaving the dogs in the car.

And outside in the car the dogs will be waiting, ears pricked for the least sound, sometimes whimpering to themselves but mostly silent, tense, and still, watching the bright door the men have closed behind them.

That image has stayed with me, along with the thrill I felt upon finishing the story. It reminds me of a comment Toby made in an interview about reading Raymond Carver's story, "Cathedral," for the first time. When he came to the end, he said, "I felt like I was in some strange way floating." Later that year, I spotted Toby's memoir, *This Boy's Life*, on the library's new book shelf and began to read it during my lunch hour. It was this book, with its unanimously enthusiastic reviews and subsequent movie adaptation, that would both confirm my regard for Toby and turn him into the famous writer of my neighbor's boast.

After Mary and I moved to Syracuse, we saw Toby and his wife Catherine occasionally at writing department parties. One of these was held at our house on Kensington Road, and when Toby arrived he asked if he might wander around by himself; he hadn't been inside since moving. I enjoyed imagining his tour, knowing from his work how attentive he would be to the convergence of detail and emotion that would confront him in every room. He had had three children and published four books while living in the house, making it the locus of his personal and literary prosperity, and I doubted that this fact would be lost on him. Thinking of him standing on the balcony in his former bedroom, climbing the steps to the attic, I wished I was able to achieve the same intimacy with him in person that I felt toward him as a writer.

Toby's reputation expanded when the movie of *This Boy's Life*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Robert De Niro and Ellen Barkin, opened in 1993. The premier was held at the cinema in Syracuse's Carousel Mall, with DiCaprio, who played Toby as a boy, in attendance. I did not go—after six months in Syracuse, Mary and I had decided to



separate, and I had moved out of our house and into a nearby apartment. Toby called to offer his sympathy about our split, and we met once for lunch near the university. But I was no longer in the Syracuse writers' loop and no longer invited to department gatherings, so our encounters grew less frequent. A year later, I accepted a schoolteaching job at a private middle school in New Haven and moved to Connecticut.

In applying for the job, I wondered whether I would enjoy teaching adolescents. In my twenties, I had taken a year off from the library to teach seventh- and ninth-grade English, and remembered the oppressiveness of the required curriculum—tendentious historical novels written for middle schoolers. At my interview in New Haven, the English department chair told me that the ninth-grade English course focused on autobiography and memoir. The syllabus included several required books, but I was free to incorporate one or two of my own choosing in the spring—did I have anything in mind? I immediately thought of *This Boy's Life*, with its teenage protagonist and clear, anecdotal prose.

I could not have predicted the impact that *This Boy's Life* would have on my teaching. As I enter my fifteenth year at the school, it remains the only book that I have never replaced, even temporarily, on my syllabus. The following testimonial from a parent is one of many I have received over the years about the book's transformative effect on unmotivated or disaffected readers:

I want to thank you for what you've done for Ray. The part of him that reads and writes has been transformed somehow since September. I was beginning to wonder if this would ever happen to Ray, and if so when and how, so it's been very gratifying and sort of mystifying to watch him become interested in literature. He's got a long way to go but I know the light came on this year for the first time, probably while he was reading *This Boy's Life*, and it's still on.

Most books appropriate for a ninth-grade English class fall into two categories: young adult novels that appeal to students for their colloquial styles and topical plots, but offer little to study in terms of literary artistry, and classics that the average teenager might be persuaded to admire but not to love. *This Boy's Life* is the rare book in which students not only recognize, but care about the connection between the author's craft and their reading pleasure.

On the day that I hand out the book, I have the students turn immediately to the first page. Toby and his mother are driving cross-country when their car breaks down. As they wait for help at the bottom of an incline, a truck careens by, having lost its brakes, and plummets off a cliff. The section concludes:

We stood with the others at the cliff's edge. Nobody spoke. My mother put her arm around my shoulder.

For the rest of the day she kept looking over at me, touching me, brushing back my hair. I saw that the time was right to make a play for souvenirs. I knew she had no money for them, and I had tried not to ask, but now that her guard was down, I couldn't help myself. When we pulled out of Grand Junction, I owned a beaded Indian belt, beaded moccasins, and a bronze horse with a removable, tooled-leather saddle.

I ask my students to write down everything they know about Toby's character based on that vignette, and later, when they have finished the book, I remind them of the details they came up with, all of which characterize the likable schemer they have come to know. They always marvel that Wolff conveys so much of his protagonist's charm in that brief opening scene, while still making the reader want to turn the page and learn more.

When I started teaching *This Boy's Life*, having just moved to New Haven from Syracuse, I told my students about my acquaintance with Tobias Wolff. They were impressed, though more by Toby as the grown-up version of their book's main character than as its celebrated author. While not mentioning my connection to Toby would have seemed disingenuous, doing so made me feel a bit like a name-dropper bragging about my literary contacts. After the class finished *This Boy's Life* and went on to sample the chapter from [The Duke of Deception](#) in which the two brothers reunite in California, I chose not to disclose my family relationship to Geoffrey.

For my first ten years in New Haven, I drove back to Syracuse every other weekend to see my son, Dev, who still lived with his mother on Kensington Road. Mary always visited friends while I was in town, allowing me to stay in the house. I slept in my old attic study, which she used as a guest room. One Friday morning before I left for Syracuse, my English class had engaged in a spirited discussion of *This Boy's Life*—we were halfway through the book, and Toby's desperation to escape his abusive stepfather had escalated to the point where my students' investment in the story was palpable. After school, I set off in my car for Syracuse, my thoughts still full of the book and the passion it invariably inspired in my classes.

I arrived at the house in time for dinner, after which Dev and I watched a movie on TV. Then he went off to bed and I climbed to the attic. As usual, I spent a few minutes reacquainting myself with the familiar room, which inevitably led to reflections on my failed marriage and truncated time in Syracuse. For all of Mary's graciousness in vacating the house for my visits, it was never easy staying there, though I had pleasant memories of reading and writing in the converted attic. As part of his remodeling, Toby had fashioned a space for a desk in front of the room's only window, where I would often sit in the soundproofed silence watching snow collect on the roof of the house next door.

Before turning out the light that night, I picked up my copy of *This Boy's Life* and started to read the pages I had assigned for Monday. Suddenly an idea occurred to me. Doing some quick calculations, I confirmed that Toby must have written the book in this very room; in all the time I had spent here, this fact had never registered with me. The paragraph I had paused on had been remembered, drafted and revised under the sharply sloping ceiling, at a desk before the window that at that moment conveyed a breeze to my bed.

When I blurted this discovery to my students on Monday, they seemed more perplexed than thrilled. Perhaps the connection between the book lying on each of their desks and their English teacher's private life was too incongruous, involving too many nuances of divorce and transience. I realized then that it was time to stop commingling my personal connection to Wolff with my teaching of his memoir. My decision was reinforced the following fall when a new group of ninth graders arrived. One boy whose sister I had taught several years earlier said that he had heard about my Toby Wolff stories. His tone was one of interest, not dread, but I decided that it was enough to teach the same book year after year; I didn't want to be one of those teachers who recycles his anecdotes as well.

That same year, another of my students, Hugo, stopped into my room on the day before Christmas vacation and handed me a gift. Hugo's older brother, Chris, had been in my class and now attended Stanford University. According to Hugo, Chris was taking a literature class with Toby Wolff, who had left Syracuse to teach at Stanford in 1997. As I unwrapped Hugo's present, I noticed him looking unusually nervous and pleased with himself—most teacher gifts are bought and wrapped by parents, and handed over dutifully by the student. Then I noticed Chris hovering outside the room. The package contained a copy of Wolff's new book of stories, [The Night in Question](#), inscribed to me by its author.

After pondering Toby's words for a moment, I felt flattered by them, and by the lengths Hugo had gone to to procure the inscription. But my first feeling was one of relief. My concern about trading on my acquaintance with Toby had made me fear that I had overstated it in order to impress my students. What if Chris had approached Toby and my name had elicited no response? Fortunately, this hadn't happened, and the warmth of Toby's inscription, if anything, exaggerated our friendship. Still, the episode reaffirmed my decision to retire my anecdotes. And I'm glad, since my students continue to attend Toby's book signings and readings when he is in Connecticut, and if they confronted him with reminders of me each time, I doubt that he would remain so gracious.

Another reason the inscription pleased me was that in requesting it, Chris must have told Toby how much he and Hugo had liked reading *This Boy's Life* in my English class. I have always wanted to convey to Toby how much his book has meant to me, and this way felt more convincing than when I had gushed about his writing at our first meeting at his house in Syracuse. Perhaps writers as acclaimed as Toby become inured to praise, but I suspect that young Toby, the rebellious, book-loving hero of

*This Boy's Life*, would be glad to hear that his adventures have enlivened English classes and turned so many kids on to reading.

My most recent attempt to express my debt to Toby occurred a few years ago when I wrote to ask him for a blurb for a book of essays I was publishing. Once again, I felt uneasy about exploiting our acquaintance, though he had complimented one of the essays when it appeared in a Syracuse literary magazine. I brought him up to date on my life since moving to Connecticut, and mentioned how important *This Boy's Life* had been to my schoolteaching career. He wrote back a friendly reply, reiterating his comments about my essay, and declining to write the blurb. He explained that he had been so inundated by such requests that his own writing had suffered, forcing him to cease writing blurbs altogether.

I doubt that our paths will cross again. I'm no longer in touch with the writers I knew in Syracuse, and Priscilla's family sold their Rhode island house when her parents died. Busy with teaching and writing, I rarely attend book signings or readings. But next fall I will once again lay copies of *This Boy's Life*, with its cover image of a boy and his mother driving a winding mountain road, on my ninth graders' desks. For many of them, it will be one of the best books they will ever read; for a few, it will be the first good book they will love. This essay is, in part, my thank-you to Toby for that gift and for the room where he created it, looking up to watch snow pile along the eaves of the neighbor's house on Kensington Road.

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—Michael Milburn is the author of the essay collection *Odd Man In*. His second book of poems, *Drive By Heart*, will be out in 2009.

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