

Silk Parachute

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A WONDROUS NEW BOOK OF MCPHEE'S PROSE PIECES-IN MANY ASPECTS HIS MOST PERSONAL IN FOUR DECADES

The brief, brilliant essay "Silk Parachute," which first appeared in *The New Yorker* a decade ago, has become John McPhee's most anthologized piece of writing. In the nine other pieces here- highly varied in length and theme-McPhee ranges with his characteristic humor and intensity through lacrosse, long-exposure view-camera photography, the weird foods he has sometimes been served in the course of his reportorial travels, a U.S. Open golf championship, and a season in Europe "on the chalk" from the downs and sea cliffs of England to the Maas valley in the Netherlands and the champagne country of northern France. Some of the pieces are wholly personal. In luminous recollections of his early years, for example, he goes on outings with his mother, deliberately overturns canoes in a learning process at a summer camp, and germinates a future book while riding on a jump seat to away games as a basketball player. But each piece-on whatever theme-contains somewhere a personal aspect in which McPhee suggests why he was attracted to write about the subject, and each opens like a silk parachute, lofted skyward and suddenly blossoming with color and form.

John McPhee was born in Princeton, New Jersey, and was educated at Princeton University and Cambridge University. His writing career began at *Time* magazine and led to his long association with *The New Yorker*, where he has been a staff writer since 1965. Also in 1965, he published his first book, *A Sense of Where You Are*, with Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and in the years since, he has written nearly 30 books, including *Oranges* (1967), *Coming into the Country* (1977), *The Control of Nature* (1989), *The Founding Fish* (2002), and *Uncommon Carriers* (2007). *Encounters with the Archdruid* (1972) and *The Curve of Binding Energy* (1974) were nominated for National Book Awards in the category of science. McPhee received the Award in Literature from the Academy of Arts and Letters in 1977. In 1999, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Annals of the Former World*. He lives in Princeton, New Jersey.

Silk Parachute

When your mother is ninety-nine years old, you have so many memories of her that they tend to overlap, intermingle, and blur. It is extremely difficult to single out one or two, impossible to remember any that exemplify the whole.

It has been alleged that when I was in college she heard that I had stayed up all night playing poker and wrote me a letter that used the word "shame" forty-two times. I do not recall this.

I do not recall being pulled out of my college room and into the church next door.

It has been alleged that on December 24, 1936, when I was five years old, she sent me to my room at or close to 7 P.M. for using four-letter words while trimming the Christmas tree. I do not recall that.

The assertion is absolutely false that when I came home from high school with an A-minus she demanded an explanation for the minus.

It has been alleged that she spoiled me with protectionism, because I was the youngest child and therefore the most vulnerable to attack from overhead-an assertion that I

cannot confirm or confute, except to say that facts don't lie.

We lived only a few blocks from the elementary school and I routinely ate lunch at home. It is reported that the following dialogue and ensuing action occurred on January 22, 1941:

"Eat your sandwich."

"I don't want to eat my sandwich."

"I made that sandwich, and you are going to eat it, Mister Man. You filled yourself up on penny candy on the way home, and now you're not hungry."

"I'm late. I have to go. I'll eat the sandwich on the way back to school."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Allegedly, I went up the street with the sandwich in my hand and buried it in a snowbank in front of Dr. Wright's house. My mother, holding back the curtain in the window of the side door, was watching. She came out in the bitter cold, wearing only a light dress, ran to the snowbank, dug out the sandwich, chased me up Nassau Street, and rammed the sandwich down my throat, snow and all. I do not recall any detail of that story. I believe it to be a total fabrication.

There was the case of the missing Cracker Jack at Lindel's corner store. Flimsy evidence pointed to Mrs. McPhee's smallest child. It has been averred that she laid the guilt on with the following words: "Like mother like son' is a saying so true, the world will judge largely of mother by you." It has been asserted that she immediately repeated that proverb three times, and also recited it on other occasions too numerous to count. I have absolutely no recollection of her saying that about the Cracker Jack or any other controlled substance. We have now covered everything even faintly unsavory that has been reported about this person in ninety-nine years, and even those items are a collection of rumors, half-truths, prevarications, false allegations, inaccuracies, innuendos, and canards.

This is the mother who-when Alfred Knopf wrote her twenty-two-year-old son a letter saying, "The readers' reports in the case of your manuscript would not be very helpful, and I think might discourage you completely"-said, "Don't listen to Alfred Knopf. Who does Alfred Knopf think he is, anyway? Someone should go in there and k-nock his block off." To the best of my recollection, that is what she said.

I also recall her taking me, on or about March 8, my birthday, to the theatre in New York every year, beginning in childhood. I remember those journeys as if they were today. I remember "A Connecticut Yankee." Wednesday, March 8, 1944. Evidently, my father had written for the tickets, because she and I sat in the last row of the second balcony. Mother knew what to do about that. She gave me for my birthday an elegant spyglass, sufficient in power to bring the Connecticut Yankee back from Vermont. I sat there watching the play through my telescope, drawing as many guffaws from the surrounding audience as the comedy on the stage.

On one of those theatre days-when I was eleven or twelve-I asked her if we could start for the city early and go out to LaGuardia Field to see the comings and goings of airplanes. The temperature was well below the freeze point and the March winds were so blustery that the wind-chill factor was forty below zero. Or seemed to be. My mother figured out how to take the subway to a stop in Jackson Heights and a bus from there-a feat I am unable to duplicate to this day. At LaGuardia, she accompanied me to the observation deck and stood there in the icy wind for at least an hour, maybe two, while I, spellbound, watched the DC-3s coming in on final, their wings flapping in the gusts. When we at last left

the observation deck, we went downstairs into the terminal, where she bought me what appeared to be a black rubber ball but on closer inspection was a pair of hollow hemispheres hinged on one side and folded together. They contained a silk parachute. Opposite the hinge, each hemisphere had a small nib. A piece of string wrapped round and round the two nibs kept the ball closed. If you threw it high into the air, the string unwound and the parachute blossomed. If you sent it up with a tennis racquet, you could put it into the clouds. Not until the development of the multi-megabyte hard disk would the world ever know such a fabulous toy. Folded just so, the parachute never failed. Always, it floated back to you-silkily, beautifully-to start over and float back again. Even if you abused it, whacked it really hard-gracefully, lightly, it floated back to you.

Excerpted from Silk Parachute by John McPhee.

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