

Beginnings

Full name: Paul Belville Taylor, Jr.; as a tot called Pete after Peter Rabbit (we both liked carrots); called Darlin' when in my mother's lap; in boyhood was Paulie to the Buttses—unofficial foster parents, whom I lived with for a while; was Pedah to a college sweetheart; a sign-language P to deaf-mute friend Babe; Peter Paul's Mounds to several dancers in New York; Pablo to Martha Graham; Geek to Lincoln Kirstein; lately known as Boss or PT to my troupe.

Put chronologically, these names chart a zigzag course that begins in cuteness, climbs to various levels of endearment, takes a dip on reaching geekhood, then reaches solid respectability. Ahem. Am proud to be a plurality—ambivalent and inexplicable maybe, yet definitely a group—a whole band of crisscrossing travelers unto myself. There have been other, less loving names, of course, ones flung hotly when the perpetrators were out of sorts, confused, or envious. But me, I'm adaptable. Trouping builds your

endurance; bumpy dance roads lead to thick soles and an unnatural kind of tolerance. It's like turning to the left.

Basic rule of life: Never be seen in the same room with more than three of myself at the same time.

Vital statistic: insatiable itch to communicate to the world at large.

All told, I'm a very nice people.

Mother's maiden name: Elizabeth Rose Pendleton; first married name, Knox; second, Taylor. I called her Mammy. One of her ancestors, William Rust, came to this country from Suffolk County, England, around 1650, and settled in Westmoreland in the colony of Virginia. Though some of Mother's ancestors had been wealthy landowners, her parents were anything but. Nevertheless, she was brought up to consider herself part of Virginia's elite and was to pass on this tradition when raising her own children, including me, although in my case less Southern gentility seems to have taken than with the others. I have, however, always been fond of magnolias and grits.

When she was eighteen, Mother left the village of Oak Grove, Virginia, to attend a business school in Washington, D.C., at the same time working as a secretary to her uncle Harry Rust, a realtor, and in the kitchen of a hotel dining room run by that uncle's sister. In Washington she was active in women's rights, was a suffragette and one of the first women to vote. She soon married Thomas Knox (Dear Daddy), whom she'd previously met in his hometown, Fredericksburg, and who was now working as a draftsman for the Navy Department. During the five years that they were married they had three children—Sophie, Tom, and Bettie. On New Year's Day, 1919, soon after World War I ended, an influenza epidemic took the life of Dear Daddy. My mother's love for him remained undiminished, if not increasing, throughout the rest of her days.

Left to raise the three children by herself, she found work as a playground supervisor in Georgetown and supplemented her income by renting out two rooms of her home in Clarendon, another suburb of Washington. Even so, the income was barely adequate, and raising the children was difficult. During this time my father and his mother were her roomers.

My father, Paul Belville Taylor, Ph.D., was descended from Huguenots—French Protestants who came to this country from the small island of Ré around 1670 and settled on Staten Island, which was then under Dutch rule. Born in 1891 in Pasadena, California, my father graduated from the University of Southern California, then came to Washington, where he worked toward his doctorate in physics while holding a job with the War Department. The Government then relocated him in Philadelphia, where he stayed for two years and then returned to Washington. At this time,

1928, he and my mother were married. The family, including my father's mother, then moved to Morristown, New Jersey, and then to Edgewood, Pennsylvania, just outside Pittsburgh, where he took a job with Westinghouse.

Two years later, in 1930 during the Great Depression, I was born. Mother was then forty; my father, a year younger. (Between Sophie, my eldest half-sister, and myself there is a difference of sixteen years.) When the Depression drastically reduced my father's income, he left his job and the family returned to Washington, where Mother once again became breadwinner, this time operating a dining room at the Brighton Hotel on California Street, which she took over from her sister, Emily.

Like many others hit by the Depression, the family did not draw together. I wouldn't say that the hard times were to blame, but they certainly didn't help. My father had been unacceptable to his three stepchildren. To them he seemed an overly strict disciplinarian, peculiar and a typical absentminded professor. He insisted on having Mother and her children address him as "Dr. Taylor," which they did, although thinking it a bit odd to be calling a physicist a doctor—not to mention the distancing effect that it had. The children, unable to transfer to him any of the love that they still held for their real father, considered him an intruder. My mother, too, soon regretted the marriage. She found her mother-in-law domineering and difficult to live with; she was exhausted by the restaurant work; and when it became clear that my father had become overly attracted to her elder son, she eased the situation by sending Tom off to a military academy. Sophie was enrolled at William and Mary College, and fifteen-year-old Bettie was kept at home to look after me, the hotel dining room taking most of Mother's time. My father then moved to Ohio and, after the legally required five-year separation, was divorced by Mother.

Other than these things, I had not known very much about my father. I once asked if what I'd heard about his attraction to Tom was true, to which he replied, "Yes, I was fond of Tom"—a reasonable enough reply, I thought, although not quite as enlightening as I'd hoped. He then added hesitantly, "We do only what we can do." Afterwards, thinking it over, I was unable to determine whether by the "we" he had meant himself, both of us, or all males everywhere. It had bothered me that a disruptive gene might have been passed on to me, but later on I read somewhere a scientist's announcement that there is no such thing as one hundred percent male or one hundred percent female, and so I began to view varying degrees of attraction between like genders as being a trait common not only to all humans but to all life forms.

When my parents separated, my father left Washington to go to Ohio,

where he worked at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base as a civilian radio engineer and, while there for the next twenty-five years or so, taught classes and made important contributions to the early development of radar. He remarried—again to a widow—and then, after being divorced a second time, arranged for a third widow to be his live-in cook and housekeeper. She already had two sons of her own, whom he sent through college.

When I was three or four, from fragments of overheard conversation, I was able to piece together most of the facts surrounding the absence of my father. Although I was unable to understand the main reason for the divorce, it was clear to me that my mother and her three other children held little affection for him. I had no memories of the family's dispersal or the divorce proceedings. Whenever his name was mentioned—which, believe me, wasn't often—it was a relief for me to hear him referred to as "Dr. Taylor" instead of "your father." I soon figured out that I was called Pete not so much because I shared a liking for carrots with Peter Rabbit but more because the name Paul had an unwelcome ring to it.

By court ruling, my father was allowed to visit me once or twice a year. I both dreaded and looked forward to his day-long visits. Allegiance to my mother vied with excitement over the gifts of toys that he'd be bringing me, gifts that I wasn't sure would be proper to accept; but, though feeling somewhat compromised, I always did. It seemed to me that my father was visiting as a duty more than for any other reason. It never occurred to me that his air of detachment might have been due to an undemonstrative nature or a decision on his part not to compete with my mother for my affections. Shyly, in an embarrassingly befuddled way, he would take me to the zoo or Glen Echo amusement park or the Smithsonian. Before each visit I was left by Bettie to wait for him in the Brighton Hotel's lobby and, while there, often fantasized about what it might be like to have a regular father. During the visits there was little communication between us. By nature I was quiet and rarely asked questions or spoke unless spoken to. When the visits were over, I felt relieved, then played surreptitiously with the gifts, always being careful to hide them away afterwards.

The Brighton's halls were largely unexplored. There was no telling who lived behind the long rows of closed doors. My impression was that nearly everyone was old at the old Brighton. Soph and Tom were away, Mummy nearly always at work, and only teen-age Bettie around. Naturally, she tended to be more involved with her own affairs. Friend Jackie Willett was the only one of my own age at the Brighton. He had a pale complexion, asthma, a whine, and a mother who sang in amateur Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. I would have considered him better company if he hadn't carried on so much every time I bit him.

A lot of time was spent amusing myself with made-up games and imaginary playmates. I don't remember ever being lonely—I had health, privacy, and a mother whom I was wild about. Though more of a figure to love than an actual presence, she made me feel special. Noticing that I liked to draw, she arranged art lessons for me on Saturdays at the Corcoran Gallery. While other kids there painted stick-limbed potato people, I turned out realistic figures with foreshortened limbs, portraits that resembled the models, and buildings done in perspective. When my teacher deemed me a child prodigy, the classes were discontinued, my mother explaining that she had once been married to someone who was considered a genius in his field and that she didn't intend to have another in the family.

She liked her Darlin' the way he was—wholesome and sensible. She saw me as being a good little boy who never cried and hardly ever sucked his thumb; I saw my Mammy as being the best ever.

But I was worried about her having to work so hard and, prematurely poetic at about age six, before going to bed every night, left verses for her to find tucked under her pillow. They were there to let her know that I loved and was proud of her. Dozens of them, lettered on small pieces of colored construction paper, were stuffed into a large envelope by her, tied with darning yarn and saved.

One of them illustrated an overly strict sense of rhyme:

IF I ARCHED OVER
ALL THE WORLD
I COULD NEVER FIND
A BETTER MOTHER IN THE WORLD.

In time the rhyming loosened up:

MY DARLING PRISHUS
MOTHER
I WILL NEVER LOVE
ANOTHER.

Rhyme schemes having become old hat, I then tackled free verse:

YOUR PEARTER THAN A BIRD IN THE SKY
HOW I DON'T KNOW SO DON'T ASK.

To Mammy, well into middle age, this one was probably flattering:

WHEN YOUR OLD AND GET TO BE
THIRTY FOUR OR FORTY THREE

DON'T YOU HOPE THAT YOU WILL SEE
LOTS OF FLOWERS AND A BEE.

These represented an “unferld” period:

YOUR THE
PERTIST THING
IN THE HOLE
WORLD
PERTIER THAN
ALL THE FLOWERS
UNFERLD.

YOU ARE THE MOST
WONDUFUL MOTHER IN THE WORLD
MORE PREASUS TO ME
THAN AMERICA UNFERLD.

IF I HAD MY
CHOICE BETWEEN
YOU AND THE WORLD
ID PICK YOU OUT
FIRST BEFORE A
SNAKE COULD UNFERLD.

I felt loved at the Brighton—most times, but at other times not quite enough, and it then seemed sensible to leave. The first runaway occurred just after Bettie had declared my beloved pillow, Pody, unsanitary. She'd taken me down to an incinerator in the basement, where she had me watch while she removed the pillowcase and tossed Pody into the flames. We returned upstairs, I packed a few duds in Pody's leftover case, gave Bettie a peck on the cheek, and said, “That's the last one,” then got as far as Rock Creek Park before being brought back by a policeman.

The second runaway was really more of an elopement. Alicia, a fellow inmate at the Kalorama Day School (which, by the way, was mostly unsuccessful at teaching French to five-year-olds), had pretty curls that reached her waist. Reason enough to propose. We then went off on our honeymoon, but, again, the police intervened.

It was always good to get back to Mammy. I'd wait till she'd come from work and settle into her rocking chair. I'd then climb onto her lap, and we'd navigate gentle waters while she softly sang “Go Tell Aunt Nancy the Old Gray Goose is Dead,” her voice wonderfully off-key. The song sounded sadly nostalgic, as were the outer edges of her downward-sloping eyes, which,

when tired, sometimes brimmed at memories of her first husband. Lulled by her rocker's rhythmic tick, and intoxicated by the scent of her sachet, I'd relax my grip from around her neck, drift off, and be carried to my bed.

Having spent much time in the bed—it doubled as a playpen—I remember it well. It was a blue haven, wheeled, with decal ducks and bubbles; one of its barred sides was lowerable. The rectangular world within was one to pretend in. Pody was its flora; Teddy Bear its fauna.

A good two feet tall, President Roosevelt's namesake had a threadbare nose continually damp from kisses. His nutmeg-brown eyes, each backed with a wire, whenever lost were always found and stuck back in, but carefully—a sharp wire could smart. Not up to Victorian standards, he'd been rescued from impropriety by grandmother Mocky, who had sewn him some green pants and striped jacket firmly secured with unbuttonable mother-of-pearl buttons.

Friend bear was well-spoken and an authority on dinosaurs (we'd seen them in books). He traveled far and wide, bringing back lots of fanciful stories. He also listened well, even though both ears had been singed during an adventure at the edge of a volcanic crater with a piranha and a pterodactyl.

He realized that the rules of conversation required us to take turns, and so I got to tell him some of my own stories. One of these, a true one, was about a walk through woods that I'd taken with Mammy, how she'd removed her bloomers so as to catch an owl in them, and how we'd had to let it go again because it had cried. "Owls don't cry," countered Teddy Bear. "Everybody knows that that wet stuff around their eyes is from owl disease."

He sometimes advised me not to be such a sissy over things that bothered me, such as when Soph and Tom came home from school on holidays. They and their dates would tiptoe to my bed, lift me out, and place me, still sleeping, on the center of the living room rug, where I'd wake to the sounds of their laughter. These were the first times that I remember entertaining an audience, something that I didn't much enjoy. The feeling of being watched was bad enough, but to be seen while in the most vulnerable state—with eyes closed—was mortifying. Carried back to bed, indignant and burning with shame, I was required to finish off the entertainment with a baby's prayer, usually "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep." My preferred prayer, one that Teddy Bear and I murmured in private, was a plea that Mammy not have to work so hard. Inside our barred blue haven, pillow Pody, before cremation, wasn't big enough for two, so friend bear laid his head on it while I used my elbow.

Another friend, thin and elderly George H. Tacet, Ph.D., the most memorable of all my imaginary ones, lived at the end of one of the many doored halls at the Brighton. Naturally, I was the only one who ever saw or

spoke to him. Everyone else disapproved of his calling himself a Ph.D., because, as gathered from inside sources, he was only a doctor of phrenology (I'd been fascinated by drawings of sectioned-off brains, each section numbered and categorized as to exact function). He sometimes materialized in the lobby, where he could be seen sitting in one of the art deco chairs and admiring a reflection that came across the room from a large rococo mirror. His head looked like a misshapen light bulb, smelled of pomade, and his elegant long trousers were made of the same navy blue serge as my short ones. If asked, he'd lift me up onto his bony knee, warn me not to interrupt, and become extremely talkative. Not even the song of a locust enchanted me the way his raspy voice did. His dissertations and grandiose airs were delightful, and it was a special treat to be permitted to finger the odd bumps on his head. I always eagerly anticipated these times with him, which, unlike Dr. Taylor's visits, came often and were without embarrassment.

In those days he seemed to be a nice old gentleman, and his existence always served practical purposes, such as when I was accused of misconduct, for then I could shift the blame to him by saying, "Old Tacet did it." Naturally, no one ever believed me, this being a last-ditch effort to avoid the hairbrush. If my mother were alive today, she'd laugh at me for still fantasizing—yet it's the truth.

Even now, whenever necessary, I still summon forth the old geezer—in theater programs, for example, to credit him for costumes that I've designed, ones for which I prefer not getting the hook. Yes, he's another of my names: the unlikely but lovely and perfectly logical Tacet/Taylor. As to my other names, the ones hotly flung as well as those kindly intended, I do my best to live up to all of them. What's in a name? Say my name—no numbers, please. Say my name, any of them, and for you, from your point of view, that's who I'm likely to be.

Sunnyside

Edgewater Beach, a small community on the South River in Maryland about fifteen miles from where the river joins Chesapeake Bay, is divided by an inlet into two sections, Sunnyside and Shadyside. Like an area of opposites, like certain people, the place is pluralistic.

In Sunnyside a long, steep flight of wooden steps leads directly from the shore to Mammy's summer cottage. In July I could sit on the top step and watch the sun sink behind the exact center of a distant bridge or, better yet, lie upside down there and watch sunsets in reverse. A wash of pink twilight turns cattails greener and shoulders of red-winged blackbirds brighter; the river darkens; a cove on the far side melts away; and when the last tiny edge of the sun blinks out, all Sunnyside seems to sigh.

I was sighing, too, but not about the sunset. A long-hoped-for playmate of my own age had arrived only to be taken away. It was to be another summer of solitary games. Mammy arranged with an orphanage to borrow one of its boys for me to spend the summer with, but, uninterested in any of the activities I could suggest, he'd become listless and homesick and had to be returned.

That would've left the three neighborhood kids, if they'd been more approachable—they say I'm too young for them. Their boat trips, cookouts, and birthday parties are to be envied; but mostly I envy them for their father, who shows cartoon movies at dusk. Uninvited, I sometimes sneak over to watch Betty Boop from outside their rec room window. At other times I catch lightning bugs, store them in a mayonnaise jar with icepicked top, and save them for half-sister Bettie in case she comes to the cottage. Bettie is real old—eighteen—has personality, goes dancing at Annapolis, and sometimes stops off here between proms. Wearing a net filled with lightning bugs in your hair is glamorous, she says; and though they smell funny, the flashing effect is just wonderful. Now that I'm six, she's stopped telling everybody that she's my mother. Seems more distant. It's maybe because I try to tag along on her dates. On the last one I heard her whisper to her newest beau, "Jeepers, here he comes again. Quick, let's scam!"

But even without pals Sunnyside is swell. There's lots of nature, and I'm crazy about anything that flies, crawls, or slithers. The backyard mimosa is usually good for a locust or two, even a flying squirrel, and hollyhock blossoms are good for closing around the bumblebees that feed inside. It's exciting to hear their angry buzzing, then release the petals and run.

The best time for wading in the river is at low tide, when it's easy to imagine the tide being in and that you're strolling underwater through the giant eel grass. There on the bottom everything looks larger and more colorful. Minnows are monsters gliding silently. The striped ones I call tigers; the stubby, toe-nibbling kind, pigs. The needle-nose ones are streaks; and the fatties with blue-bordered gills, sunnies. When taken out of their salt-water home and put into a pail of fresh water, they soon float to the surface, tummies first. It's very interesting, how fast their colors fade.

And you can grab the heads of pulsing pink jellyfish without getting stung and fling them up onto the beach where they dry into nothing.

Finger-nipping blue-clawed crabs can be lifted by their back flippers and flopped over on their backs to see if they are boys or girls. The soft-shelled kind can't bite and are Mammy's favorite dish, so whenever she leaves her work at the Brighton and comes to visit I always have some waiting. I stuff them live into my pockets until the right moment and then, since they're tightly packed, have to present them piece by piece. "Mercy, Darlin'!" she always says.

And along the strip of motor-oil-dotted wildflowers that marches between two sandy ruts of the road that leads to the highway flit my chums, the monarchs, swallowtails, and small grays who are bewitched by rainbow-colored meat and mud puddles. I want to do my share by helping Mammy earn our living, so sometimes I wait at the side of the road with locust clusters in one hand and a For Sale sign in the other. But approaching cars make me shy, and, hiding the flowers and sign behind my back, I usually pretend to be only out for a walk.

The next summer, since the family is staying in Washington, the cottage is locked up and I'm room-and-boarded with Mrs. Wilson, a Sunnyside neighbor. She teaches me to swim, lets me listen to "I Love a Mystery" and the abdication of Edward on her domed wooden radio, and doesn't seem to mind that I spend a lot of time sitting at the top of the sunset steps.

I go there to remember, to pretend that Mammy's still standing in front of a Frans Hals *Laughing Cavalier* that hangs over the mantel inside, also to picture the attic where I slept, its trap door and the secret place under a loose floorboard where treasures are hidden—my Indian-head pennies and collections of locusts and dried mice—the attic where I'd been sent on the day that Dr. Taylor had come to see me and Mammy had not wanted him here. Afterwards she'd told me that when he wouldn't leave, force had been administered. With Sunnyside cheer and Shadyside gloom, I'm still trying to imagine what type of punch brother Tom used to knock him down.

But until I can go back to the Brighton, there are better things to do than sit around in the past. There's blue clay and red to be dug from under the sand, both needed for The Secret Sinking of the Seven. First the heads of seven minnows, no more, no less, have to be encased in clay. Red for boys, blue for girls, and then you toss the victims into the river, where, tails thrashing uselessly, they plummet to the bottom.

Though the ritual gives my spine a lovely tingle of evil, I prefer the other one—The Sacrificial Punishment of the Ogre. For this you make little nude men out of the soft clay and hurl them hard against the cement sea wall. The

thrill comes afterwards while inspecting their parts to see which have gotten squashed flat. And all the time I'm thinking of Dr. Taylor, my no-good absent father.

The Buttses

When I was nearing ten, my mother sent me to a boy's camp in Vermont. After buying me a metal trunk, she packed it with clothes and camping gear—a canteen and a cooking kit, in thrilling olive-drab jackets—and then she kissed me and put me on a train that was to take me on my first real trip.

Like many others to follow, it was to be a leg of a long tour, each segment to bring discoveries, premonitions, promises. Looking back now, I see each relocation—by bus, train, plane, or thumb—as being a part of a whole. Each leg changed something in my life, each had its own revelation, though I couldn't have put what it was in so many words. Like a dance they showed me another world, and they each took on their own identity of direction, movement, development, change. And though they happened in sequential order, in meaning they had a different chronology, were an itinerary with a backwards or sideways logic. As experienced by a troupe of dancers, trips stayed very much in the present, and it was only later that something subjective in me sometimes explained the continuous thread of the perpetual journey's meanings.

All the way to camp I sat with my nose glued to the window. Being inside the train was like being wrapped in a protective cocoon; outside, landscapes were passing. I saw myself as passing them; but later, with an older, more practiced and self-centered eye, I learned to see them as passing me. And later I remembered the window frame as being a wonderful, practically holy window frame, not one of those inadequate small prosceniums that crowded and forced me into the wings.

Soon after arriving at camp, splendid old Tacet was put on hold, immediately having been replaced by a sturdier model—Mr. Butts, the camp's director. Because of his brawny build, the rolling lope to his walk, and prehensile toes that looked as if able to get a good grip on branches and vines, to me he was Tarzan. I was sure that he was out of Africa, and not, as everyone else believed, from Oklahoma. According to his wife, Miz