AVOID BORING PEOPLE
I was born in 1928 in Chicago into a family that believed in books, birds, and the Democratic Party. I was the firstborn, followed two years later by my sister, Betty. My birth was at St. Luke’s Hospital, not far by car from Hyde Park, where my parents lived after their marriage in 1925. Soon after Betty was born, my parents moved to South Shore, a middle-class neighborhood populated by bungalows, vacant lots, and two-story apartment houses. We lived in an apartment on Merrill Avenue before relocating in 1933 to a small, four-room bungalow that my parents bought at 7922 Luella Avenue, two blocks away. That move allowed my financially stretched, seventy-two-year-old grandmother to live with us in the rear bedroom next to the kitchen. In newly created tiny attic rooms, Betty and I slept on bunk-like beds.

Though I went to prekindergarten at the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, the Depression quickly placed private education beyond my parents’ means. I, however, was in no way disadvantaged by changing to public school. Our Luella Avenue home was only five blocks away from the academically rigorous Horace Mann Grammar School, which I attended from the ages of five through thirteen. It was then a relatively new brick building built in the early 1920s in Tudor style, possessing a large auditorium for assemblies and
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a gymnasium where I was seldom able to do more than two or three push-ups.

While both of my father’s parents were Episcopalians, only his father, Thomas Tolman Watson (born 1876), a stockbroker, was a Republican. His wife, constantly upset at being a speculator’s wife, showed her displeasure by invariably voting for a Democrat. She was born Nellie Dewey Ford in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Her mother was a descendant of the settler Thomas Dewey, who arrived in Boston in 1633. The Watson side of my family can be traced back to the New Jersey–born William Weldon Watson (born 1794), who would become minister of the first Baptist church established west of the Appalachians, in Nashville, Tennessee. When he returned from a Baptist convention at Philadelphia in a prairie schooner (before railroads), he brought with him the first soda water fountain ever seen in Tennessee. To counteract the local whisky demon, he set up the soda fountain on a street corner near the church and single-handedly made soda water all the rage. Reputedly he made enough money selling soda water to build a new church for his growing congregation, and it still stands today in the heart of Nashville.

His eldest son, William Weldon Watson II, moved north to Springfield, Illinois, where it is said he designed a house for Abraham Lincoln across the street from his own. With his wife and brother Ben, he later accompanied Lincoln on the inaugural train to Washington. Ben’s son, William Weldon Watson III (born 1847), married in 1871 Augusta Crafts Tolman, the daughter of an Episcopalian banker from St. Charles, Illinois. Afterward he became a hotelkeeper, first north of Chicago and then in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, where he raised five sons including my grandfather, Thomas Tolman Watson. After my grandfather’s marriage in 1895, he initially sought his fortune at the newly discovered Mesabi Range, the great iron-ore-bearing region located near Duluth on western Lake Superior. Then he joined his older brother, William, later to be one of Mesabi’s senior management. My father, James D. Watson Sr., was born in 1897, followed over the next decade by his brothers, William Weldon IV, Thomas Tolman II, and Stanley Ford.

From northern Minnesota, my father’s parents moved back to the Chicago region, where, with the help of his wife’s money, my grand-
father bought a large Colonial Revival–style home in Chicago’s affluent western suburb of La Grange. My father went to the local schools there before attending Oberlin College in Ohio for a year. Dad’s freshman year ended, however, with scarlet fever rather than academic laurels. The following year he would start commuting into Chicago’s commercial banking center (the Loop, with its ring of elevated tracks) to work at the Harris Trust Company. Money was short, as usual.

But making money was never near my father’s heart, and after World War I started, he enthusiastically joined the Illinois National Guard (Thirty-third Division), soon shipping off to France for more than a year. Upon coming home he began working at La Salle Extension University, a prosperous correspondence school that offered business courses. There he met, in 1920, his future wife, Margaret Jean Mitchell (born 1899). She came to work in the personnel department after fin-
ishing two years at the University of Chicago. Mother was the only child of Lauchlin Alexander Mitchell, a Scottish-born tailor, and Elizabeth (Lizzie) Gleason, the daughter of an Irish immigrant couple (Michael Gleason and Mary Curtin) who had emigrated from Tipperary during the potato famine of the late 1840s. After farming ten years in Ohio, they moved on to land south of Michigan City, Indiana, and it was there, in 1860, that my grandmother, Nana to Betty and me, was born.

Early in her adolescence, Nana had left the Gleason farm to become a servant in the Barker mansion, the home of Michigan City’s most prosperous family, owners of a large boxcar factory. Soon Nana rose to be Mrs. Barker’s personal maid, accompanying her around the spas of the Midwest. Later, Mr. Barker took closer note and installed her in a Chicago flat together with funds that allowed her an independent life. Only more than a decade later, in her mid-thirties, did she marry Lauchlin Alexander Mitchell, born in Glasgow (1855) to Robert Mitchell and Flora MacKinnon.

As a youth, Lauchlin Mitchell immigrated to Toronto and from there to Chicago, where his custom-made-suit business thrived by the time of the Columbian Exposition of 1893. Sadly, he died in an accident when my mother was just fourteen, struck by a runaway horse carriage while coming out of the Palmer House Hotel on New Year’s Eve. My mother’s only mementos of him were a tiny MacKinnon kilt sent to her from Scotland and the splendid pastel of him that was exhibited at the 1893 World’s Fair, reportedly commissioned in exchange for a custom-made suit. Nana began to take in paying guests, in effect running an Irish boardinghouse on Chicago’s South Side.

Marring my mother’s adolescence was a lengthy bout of rheumatic fever that damaged her heart and made her short of breath if she exercised seriously. The illness ultimately cut her life short and she died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-seven. Like her mother, she followed the Catholic religion but was never a serious churchgoer. I remember her going to mass only on Christmas Eve and Easter, always saying that her heart needed to rest on weekends. On many days, particularly Sunday, Nana helped prepare our family’s meals, having a skill at cooking not commonly found among the Chicago Irish. Her presence in our home early on gave Mother the freedom to work part time at
the Housing Office of the University of Chicago, helping to supplement my father’s barely adequate salary, which had been cut by half to $3,000 when the Depression took hold.

Behind our house was an alley that separated the homes on the west side of Luella Avenue from those on the east side of Paxton Avenue. The general absence of cars made it a safe place for games of kick-the-can or setting off firecrackers that could still be bought freely around the Fourth of July. When I finally began to grow past five feet, a backboard with a basketball hoop was put up above our garage doors, allowing me to practice my free throws after school. Scarce family funds also purchased a ping-pong table to liven up winter days.

My irreligious father only reluctantly had agreed to a Catholic baptism for my sister and me. It kept peace between him and my grandmother. He may have regretted the accommodation when my sister and I began going to church on Sundays with Nana. At first I didn’t mind memorizing the catechism or going to the priest to confess my venial sins. But by the age of ten, I was aware of the Spanish Civil War and my father let me know that the Catholic Church was on the side of the fascism he despised. Though one priest at Our Lady of Peace gave sermons supporting the New Deal, many in the congregation bought
Father Coughlin’s vitriolic magazine opposing Roosevelt, England, and the Jews, which was on sale outside Our Lady of Peace following each Sunday mass.

Just after my confirmation at age eleven, I completely stopped going to Sunday masses in order to accompany my father on his Sunday morning bird walks. Even as a small boy I was fascinated by birds, and when I was only seven my uncle Tom and aunt Etta gave me a children’s book on bird migration, Traveling with Birds, by Rudyrerd Boulton, curator of birds at Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History. My father’s devotion to bird-watching went back to his high school days in La Grange. It continued equally strong after World War I when his family moved to an apartment in Hyde Park on Chicago’s South Side, so his brother Bill could conveniently attend the University of Chicago. Dad would be up before sunrise most spring and fall days to go birding in nearby Jackson Park. Our first bird walks were also in Jackson Park. There I first learned to spot the common winter-resident ducks, including the goldeneye, the old squaw, the bufflehead, and the American merganser. In the spring I quickly learned to differ-
Early on I learned from my father to keep careful notes on birds.

entiate the most common of warblers, vireos, and flycatchers that in springtime migrated north from their tropical winter homes. By the age of eleven, I already had enough book knowledge of birds to anticipate the many new species we would encounter during a 1939 drive in a borrowed car to see the San Francisco International Exposition. On that trip I added more than fifty new species to my acquaintance.

My mother, by then a captain of our Seventh Ward precinct, enjoyed working for the Democratic Party. Our basement became the local polling station, earning us ten dollars per election, and my mother made another ten manning the polls. At the 1940 Democratic National Convention, held in Chicago, we rooted, to no avail, for Paul McNutt, Indiana’s handsome governor then bidding to be chosen as Roosevelt’s running mate.

In the evenings, Dad often was consumed with work brought home from the office. His principal task as collection manager of the LaSalle correspondence school was to write letters dunning students for delinquent payments. He never believed in threatening them, instead cajoling them with reminders of how their studies of the law or accounting
would help them advance to high-paying jobs. I now realize how difficult it must have been to keep the job, he being a socialist-leaning Democrat sympathetic to the students who couldn’t pay. No one, however, could accuse him of not working hard or of undermining free enterprise or, for that matter, of frowning upon the plutocratic game of golf, which he first came to enjoy in youth but later could play only on company outings after the Depression had forced the sale of the family Hudson.

Our family always rooted for Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal’s promise to rescue the downtrodden from the heartless grasp of unregulated capitalism. We were naturally on the side of the strikers in their violent confrontations with U.S. Steel at the massive South Side mill two miles east of our home along the shore of Lake Michigan. Matters of economics, however, began to concern our family less as the German menace grew. My father was a strong supporter of the English and French, the Allies on whose side he had fought in the First World War. He would have found the Germans a natural enemy even without Hitler.
I remember his anguish when Madrid fell to Franco. The local radio stations played up the defeat of the communist-backed republicans, but Father then saw fascism and Nazism as the real evils. By the time of Munich, the news from Europe was as much cause to be glued to the radio as was the Lone Ranger or the Chicago Cubs. Particularly crucial to us was the outcome of the 1940 presidential election, wherein Roosevelt sought his third term and was opposed by Wendell Willkie. Seemingly almost as awful as the Nazis themselves were America’s isolationists, who wanted to stay out of the problems of Europe. My father was among those who saw in Charles Lindbergh’s visit to Germany a manifestation of anti-Semitism.

Occasionally my parents had nasty disagreements about mis-spending what little money they had. But these frustrations were never passed on to my sister and me, and we each regularly received five cents for the Saturday afternoon double features at the nearby Avalon Theatre. Our parents would join us for some movies, one such occasion being John Ford’s adaptation of Steinbeck’s epic chronicle *The Grapes of Wrath*. The message that great decency by itself does not generate a happy ending never left me. A long drought that turned fertile farmlands into dust clouds should not cause a family to lose everything. How any responsible citizen could see this film and not see the good brought about by the New Deal boggled my imagination.

I always liked going to grammar school and twice skipped a half grade, graduating when I was just thirteen. Somewhat downcasting were the results of my two IQ tests, discovered by stealthy looks at teachers’ desktops. In neither test did I rise much above 120. I got more encouragement from my reading comprehension scores, which placed me at the top of my class. I graduated from grammar school in June 1941, just after Germany invaded Russia. By then Churchill had joined Roosevelt as a hero of mine, and on most evenings we listened to Edward R. Murrow reporting from London on the CBS news. That summer was broken by my first time away from my family, going by train for two weeks in August to Owasippe Scout Reservation in Michigan above Muskegon on the White River. There I enjoyed working for nature-oriented merit badges that made me a Life Scout. Less fun were the overnight camping trips, in which I would invariably lag.
behind the other hikers, catching up only when they stopped to rest. Nonetheless, I came home content to have spotted thirty-seven different bird species.

I could not help realizing, however, that as a boy expert on birds I was far behind the much younger Gerard Darrow, who thanks to a prodigious memory became a Chicago celebrity when as a four-year-old ornithologist his story and talent were written up in the *Chicago Daily News*. I would resent him even more when he became the first famous “Quiz Kid” of a Sunday afternoon radio program that first aired in June 1940. Groups of five children, each of whom received a $100 defense bond, were asked questions by the host, the third-grade-educated Jolly Joe Kelley. Previously he had been emcee of the *National Barn Dance*, having first come to radio fame by reading the funnies on WLS. Almost instantaneously, *Quiz Kids* became a national sensation, with its weekly listenership between ten million and twenty million—almost half the giant audiences that listened to Jack Benny, Bob Hope, and Red Skelton.

Virtually every Sunday afternoon for over two years, I listened to *Quiz Kids* hoping that somehow I might get on the program and win a
war bond. Stoking this hope was the fact that one of the show’s producers, Ed Simmons, lived in the apartment house next to our bungalow. Finally, because of a successful audition or because of Ed Simmons’s influence, I became a fourteen-year-old Quiz Kid in the fall of 1942. My first two appearances went well, with lots of questions suited to my expertise. But my third time on, I was up against an eight-year-old called Ruth Duskin and a battery of questions on the Bible and Shakespeare dominating the thirty-minute horror. I had never been encouraged to know the plots of Shakespeare, and my early Catholic upbringing had furthermore shielded me from any knowledge of the Old Testament. So it was virtually preordained that I would not be one of the three contestants to come back for the next program. When we went home I bitterly felt the want of encyclopedic knowledge and quick wits needed for semipermanence as a Quiz Kid. But I was nevertheless three defense bonds richer. Later these were used to purchase a pair of 7×50 Bausch and Lomb binoculars to replace the ancient pair my father had used as a birder in his youth.

By then I was a sophomore at the newly built South Shore High
School. I continued as a largely S (superior) student, though I en-
countered much more competition than I had at Horace Mann. There
was a great Latin teacher, Miss Kinney, who sent me off to the state
Latin exams with the more stellar student Marilyn Weintraub, on
whom I had a slight crush that no one ever knew about. I was then
acutely conscious of my size, only five feet tall when entering high
school, and shorter than my sister, who went through puberty early
and reached her final height of five feet three inches while I was still
only five foot one.

I worked on and off behind a neighborhood drugstore soda foun-
tain making Cokes from syrup and carbonated water. The other con-
ventional teenage job possibility was as a bicycle newspaper delivery
boy. But that would have prevented my going on early bird walks with
my father and was never seriously considered. Particularly in May, we
would routinely get up while it was still dark so we could arrive in
Jackson Park soon after sunrise. That way we would have almost two

Dad and I spotted the seldom-seen white-winged
scoter off Jackson Park in Lake Michigan.
hours to go after the rarer warblers, principally in the region of
Wooded Island. Dad’s ear for birdsongs was much better than mine—
upon hearing, say, the rough sound of the scarlet tanager, he never
mistook it for the more melodious Baltimore oriole, which also
migrates into Chicago just after the leaves come out. Afterward, Dad
would catch a northbound streetcar to his work, while I would get a
trolley going in the opposite direction, which would let me off near
school.

It was in Jackson Park in 1919 that Dad had met the extraordinarily
talented but socially awkward sixteen-year-old University of Chicago
student Nathan Leopold, who was equally obsessive about spotting
rare birds. In June 1923, Leopold’s wealthy father financed a birding
expedition so Nathan and my dad could go to the jack pine barrens
above Flint, Michigan, in search of the Kirkland warbler. In their pur-
suit of this rarest of all warblers, they were accompanied by their fel-
lo Chicago ornithologists George Porter Lewis and Sidney Stein, as
well as by Nathan’s boyhood friend Richard Loeb, whose family
helped form the growing Sears, Roebuck store empire.

I had just entered high school when Dad and Mother first told me
of Nathan and how for a thrill he and Richard Loeb had brutally killed
a younger acquaintance, Bobby Franks. After offering Bobby a ride
home from school, they fatally struck him in the head, disposing of
the body in a culvert adjacent to the Eggers Wood birding site to which
Dad later often brought me. Some six months before Nathan’s sense-
less though nearly perfect crime of May 24, 1924, his father contacted
mine expressing worry about his son’s obsessive fascination with
Loeb. Nathan by then was already at the University of Chicago Law
School and Dad had no acquaintance with the rich college youths that
Leopold and Loeb moved among. In July, Leopold and Loeb were
defended in a Chicago courtroom filled with newspapermen by the
celebrated Clarence Darrow, who asked Dad to appear as a character
witness. But his family advised against this action, saying it would
mark him for life in Chicago.

After Darrow had saved his clients’ necks—they were sentenced to
life imprisonment without possibility of parole—Nathan wrote Dad
proposing a correspondence. But Dad never replied, still horrified by
the crime that had gripped Chicago as none before. Many Leopolds and Loebs changed their names, and my father and Sidney Stein ceased all communication. Many years later, I came across Stein searching, as I was, for May warblers and flycatchers in the dunes near Waukegan above Chicago’s North Shore. By then a very successful investment banker, later to be a trustee of the University of Chicago, Stein was acutely embarrassed when I identified myself as Jim Watson’s son.

There was constant talk at home about the University of Chicago, especially since my father knew its president, Robert Hutchins, whose own father had been a professor of divinity at Oberlin when my father was an undergraduate there. Hutchins had recently enacted an exciting plan for admitting students who had only finished two years of high school and whose brains had not already been rotted out by the banality of high school life. Mother took the lead in seeing that I took the scholarship exam, administered one winter morning in 1943. Soon after, I was invited back to the campus for a personal interview, at which I talked about the books I had lately read, concentrating on Carlo Levi’s antifascist statement, Christ Stopped at Eboli. Afterward I was very nervous until the director of admissions, a friend of my mother’s, reassured her that I had a decent chance at a full-tuition scholarship. When I got the good news officially, I was too happy to care that my good fortune might have been related to my mother’s being well liked by the members of the scholarship committee. Moving on to a world where I might succeed using my head—not based on personal popularity or physical stature—was all that could have mattered to me.

**Remembered Lessons**

1. **Avoid fighting bigger boys or dogs**

As a child I lived with being punier than other boys in class. The only consolation was my parents’ empathy—they encouraged constant trips to the local drugstore for chocolate milk shakes to fatten me up. The shakes made me happy, but still all through grammar school
other kids shoved me around. At first I responded with my fists, but soon I realized that being called a sissy was a better fate than being beaten up. It was easier to cross to the other side of the street than come face-to-face with loitering menaces with a nose for my fear. Likewise, I was no match for barking dogs, particularly ones I had provoked by climbing over fences into their domains. Spotting a rare bird is never worth the bite of a cur. Once bitten by a German shepherd, I knew that I preferred cats, even if they are bird-killers. Life is long enough for more than one chance at a rare bird.

2. **Put lots of spin on balls**

I long wanted to be part of the softball games played on the big vacant lot across Seventy-ninth Street. At first my only way to join in was to field foul balls. Then I learned how to put spin on underhanded pitches that kept even the better batters from routinely smacking line drives through holes in the outfield. From then on I felt much less an outsider on Saturday mornings. The spins that came from similarly slicing ping-pong serves helped make me a good player well before my arms got long enough to reach near the net of our family’s basement table.

3. **Never accept dares that put your life at risk**

Seeing classmates dash across a street to beat a coming car filled me with more horror than envy of their bravado. When I rode my bike three miles to the Museum of Science and Industry, I knew my constantly worrying mother would have preferred my taking the streetcar. But by being cautious—going down as many alleys as possible and never taking my hands off the handlebars when a car was passing—I was never really putting my life at significant risk. Likewise, in climbing up and over the branches of neighborhood trees or hoisting myself up along gutters to the roofs of one-story garages, I may have been risking a broken leg but not a fatal fall. The possibility of plunging more than ten feet never seemed worth the thrill of being high up.
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4. Accept only advice that comes from experience as opposed to revelation

Listening to my elders just because they were older was not the way I grew up. Preadolescent exposure to my relatives’ views that the New Deal would bankrupt the United States and that Hitler would cease being an aggressor after conquering England left me with no illusions that adults are less likely than children to utter nonsense. For the most part, my parents tried to provide rational explanations for why I should think a certain way or do a certain thing. So I was convinced by my mother’s advice that I wear rubbers on rainy days so as not to ruin my leather soles. At the same time, I rejected her no less often heard argument that sodden feet led to colds.

By then I was conditioned to accept my father’s disdain for any explanations that went beyond the laws of reason and science. Astrology had to be bunk until someone could demonstrate in a verifiable way that the arrangement of the stars and planets affected the course of individual lives. Equally improbable to Dad was the idea of a supreme being, the widespread belief in whose existence was in no way subject to observation or experimentation. It is no coincidence that so many religious beliefs date back to times when no science could possibly have accounted satisfactorily for many of the natural phenomena inspiring scripture and myths.

5. Hypocrisy in search of social acceptance erodes your self-respect

My parents and most of their neighbors had nothing bonding them together but Horace Mann Grammar School. Mother, with an outgoing and generous personality, naturally rose to be president of the PTA. But except for a keen interest in baseball, Dad had nothing in common with his fellow fathers. That love, however, seldom drew him into the backyards of neighbors, where frequent blasts at the New Deal and occasional anti-Semitic jokes were insufferable for Dad, whose favorite radio personality besides Franklin Roosevelt was the Jewish intellectual Clifton Fadiman. He knew enough to avoid occasions
where polite silence in response to repulsive remarks could be construed as acquiescence in their awfulness.

6. Never be flippant with teachers
My parents made it clear that I should never display even the slightest disrespect to individuals who had the power to let me skip a half grade or move into more challenging classes. While it was all right for me to know more about a topic than my sixth-grade teacher had ever learned, questioning her facts could only lead to trouble. Until one has cleared high school there is little to be gained by questioning what your teacher wants you to learn. Better to memorize obligingly their pet facts and get perfect grades. Save flights of rebellion for when authority does not have you by the throat.

7. When intellectually panicking, get help quickly
Occasionally I found myself nervously distraught, unable to repeat an algebraic trick I had learned the previous day. I never hesitated in such circumstances to turn to a classmate for help. Better for one of them to know my inadequacies than not to be able to go on to the next problem. “Do it yourself or you'll never learn” may have some validity, but fail to get it done and you’ll go nowhere. Even more frequently I was unable to express myself in words and habitually procrastinated with writing assignments. It was only with my mother’s last-minute help that I punctually submitted a well-written eighth-grade paper on the history of Chicago. Of much greater importance was Mother’s later insistence that she edit every word of my scholarship essay to the University of Chicago. I accepted her extensive editing with little guilt, then or since.

8. Find a young hero to emulate
On one of our regular Friday night visits to the Seventy-third Street public library, my father encouraged me to borrow Paul de Kruif’s cel-
ebrated 1926 book, *Microbe Hunters*. In it were fascinating stories of how infectious diseases were being conquered by scientists who went after bad germs with the same tenacity as Sherlock Holmes pursuing the evil Dr. Moriarty. Some months later I brought home *Arrowsmith*, in which Sinclair Lewis, helped by Paul de Kruif as expert consultant, relates the never-realized hope of his hero to save victims from cholera by treating them with bacteria-killing viruses. The protagonist's youth gripped me and made me realize that science could be like baseball: a young man's game whose stars made their mark in their early twenties.

Also encouraging me to aim high was my not-too-distant cousin Orson Welles, whose grandmother was a Watson. Though we never met, he also had an Illinois background and after being effectively orphaned was partly raised by my father’s uncle, the celebrated Chicago artist Dudley Crafts Watson. Always turned out with much panache, including a pince-nez, Dudley relished telling his nephew’s family of Orson’s triumphs, which began when he was a child actor in the Todd School. Orson’s daring was what appealed to me most, from his famous *War of the Worlds* radio hoax to his groundbreaking feature *Citizen Kane*. A scientist’s hero need not be a microbiologist, let alone a baseball player.