A REPORTER AT LARGE

KID, TWELVE

Who are the forgotten voters? People like Brian Tomberlind's family aren't on welfare, and don't live below the poverty line. But they are still struggling Americans. What does life look like to Brian?

BY SUSAN SHEEHAN

On a brisk Saturday afternoon in March, Brian Tomberlind, age twelve, sets off for the Hickory Hollow Mall just outside Nashville, with his mother, Penny Proctor, and his best friend, Carl. Brian's father, Nathan Tomberlind, stays at home, lying on the living-room sofa wrapped in a blanket. He has hepatitis C. Five months of interferon shots, the only approved treatment for the grave illness, have not put it in remission; they just made him feel weaker. "Nathan probably wouldn't go to the mall with us even if he felt normal," Penny says. "He don't like shopping when he ain't got money to spend. Me and Brian don't go often enough to get our hopes up, but we like looking around." Brian enjoys going to places like malls with his mother, and he gives her money for gas from his earnings, if she needs it, to get there. Penny is more at ease with herself than Nathan is, and this quality translates into ease with her son. When Brian is away from Nathan, he relaxes and seems to forget the troubles of his house.

Penny parks the family's black Mazda pickup and walks with the boys to the front of the Castner Knott department store; they giggle as they pass through the women's lingerie section on their way to a tier of small shops that line the mall's interior. At Pass Pets, the boys admire a variety of pedigreed dogs in glass cages and a selection of rats; they try in vain to coax the store's parrot to talk; they stop at a showcase of Teddy-bear hamsters and an adjacent showcase of green iguanas. The showcases are open on top. Ignoring numerous "Do Not Pick Up" signs, Brian reaches in, plucks a hamster out of its cage, and suspends it over the iguana cage. "Brian, don't be doing that," Penny says. "If you drop it in with them lizards, the hamster could have a heart attack and die." The hamster wriggles, and Brian accidentally does drop it in among the iguanas. Penny looks scared.

"Them iguanas is vegetarians," Carl assures her, and then says to Brian, "Their tongues don't hurt you. They would get you with their tails." Brian reaches in for the hamster and puts it back where it belongs.

At a store called the World of Science, Brian and Carl inspect talking jigsaw puzzles, kaleidoscopes, Spin Master devil sticks, and glow-in-the-dark stars. "This is my favorite store in the mall," Brian says. "It's got cool stuff." Brian is a lanky kid (he's five feet two inches tall and weighs ninety-eight pounds) with indigo eyes, angular features, and fine blond hair that has a home-cut look—Penny snips it with her scissors.

At Brian's second-favorite mall store, Spencer Gifts, he tries on a purple cap with a visor in front and a blond ponytail in back. "You look cute," Carl says, and tries on a headpiece with spiky "Wayne's World" hair in back. "*You* look cute," Brian retaliates.

The boys proceed to a shelf filled with Old Fart Slippers, X-rated greeting cards, Whipped Creme Body Topping, and bottles of PMS pills. "You-all know you can't look in there," Penny says, and then asks, "Brian, what does PMS mean?"

"Poor Man's Suffering," he replies. "I heard it on TV." He knows that PMS really stands for "premenstrual syndrome," because he studied sex ed last year in fifth grade and because his parents are forthright with him about the biological facts of life. When Brian was ten, Penny thought she heard him asking her what a condo was. "It's like a town house," she replied. "No, Mama, a condom," he said. She catalogued its virtues.

Brian asks Penny for five of the ten dollars she owes him. He earned the money two weeks ago at a construction site by picking up pieces of drywall and insulation for Sam, a man his father worked for when he was still healthy enough to work. Brian lent the ten dollars to Penny because she needed "money to run on." He buys a can of green Super String 2 for three dollars. He buys a space-age ice cream for two dollars, and offers Carl and Penny pieces of his treat.

"It ain't cold," Penny says. "You could of saved the money."

"But I wanted it," he says.

"Stuff like that amazes Brian," she says. "He ain't had money lately, so when he gets some he spends it quick."

When Penny and Brian return home, Nathan is still wrapped in a blanket on the sofa. Always a thin man—he is five feet nine and used to weigh a hundred and fifty-five pounds—he is down to a hundred and thirty-five pounds. "I got fever and chills real bad," he says. "That medicine ain't making me better, it's making me worse." He shifts to his son. "Brian, what about your multiplication tables?"

Penny Proctor, who is thirty-three, and Nathan Tomberlind, who is thirty-six, did a lot of "drinkin' and druggin'" from the time they were in their early teens until Brian was six. In March, 1990, while Nathan was in jail for driving under the influence, he decided to sober up; he went through a treatment program while incarcerated. Penny stopped using on her own. She had done less drinking than Nathan after she discovered that she was pregnant and after Brian's birth. Moreover, she had never injected herself with drugs. "I'll be hon-

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARRON CLAIBORNE

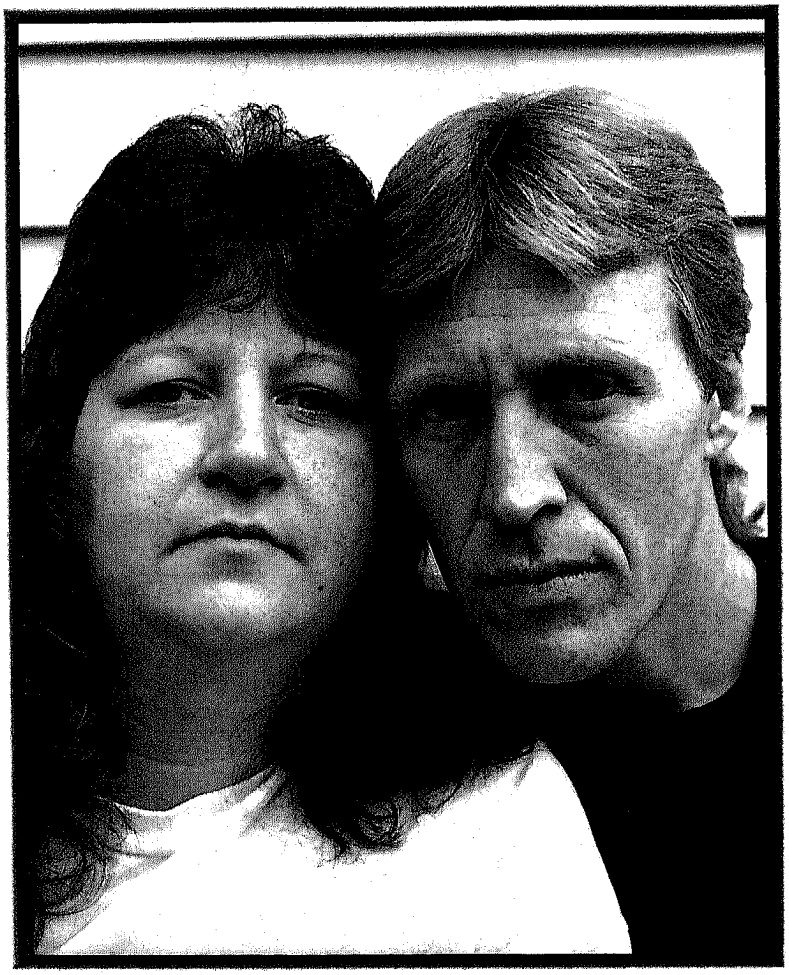
Brian (opposite) at his home in Nashville, Tennessee.

est with you, I think I got hepatitis C from dirty needles," Nathan says.

Nathan had always had a bad temper and was prone to moodiness, but his temper got worse after he learned that he had the illness, in the fall of 1994. His moods darkened as well, and Brian felt even more edgy around his father. Nathan's illness and his inability to work have given him more time to focus on his son. Several months ago, part of Brian's homework was to put thirty words "in 'ABC' order" and then define them. He borrowed a classmate's completed assignment, "not because I couldn't do it but to get it done faster," and went into his room after school. He sat on his bed—he doesn't have a desk—copying away. When Nathan entered his bedroom, Brian covered the paper. "Give it to me, Bubba," Nathan said. It was the second time Brian had borrowed his classmate's homework but the first time he had been caught. Nathan telephoned the school principal, who summoned Brian to his office. "You're one of our best students," the principal told him. "If we didn't have people like you at school, the school would be bad. You know your daddy loves you or he wouldn't have done this. Don't do it again, or you'll be in major-league trouble." Nathan kept Brian indoors for several afternoons after the cheating episode. Asked if he had learned his lesson, Brian answered, "Yeah. I know if I cheat I'll be punished."

Nathan's current obsession is Brian's failure to memorize his multiplication tables. He is determined that Brian will master them before the last day of sixth grade. Brian has trouble with math and is lazy about learning multiplication. On this late-March afternoon, when Nathan asks him what six times six is, he doesn't know. He seems to hope that Nathan will forget about multiplication between March and the end of May.

ON Sunday morning, the Tomberlinds dress casually. Brian is wearing a green T-shirt with a white Nike swoosh logo, which he bought with most of the money Sam gave him for his birthday the previous month. Nathan drives from their house, in south Nashville, to Cumberland Heights treatment center in the city's rural outskirts, where the family attends spiritual services.



Penny Proctor and Nathan Tomberlind. Trying to pay off a mortgage, raise Brian, and save for the future on twenty-two thousand dollars a year.

In December, 1994, the Tomberlinds had a brief relapse. Nathan started smoking marijuana, Penny smoked a joint and, after an operation on her foot, started taking more pain medication than the doctor had prescribed for her; Nathan helped himself to Penny's pain pills. "I went back to A.A. on December 29th—that's my birthday—and picked up a desire chip," Nathan says. "I'd been over four years sober, from 1990 to 1994, but in 1995 I couldn't get past my thirty-day chip." There was a crisis in August, 1995. Nathan hit Brian with a belt—hard. Penny left the house, taking Brian with her to the home of one of her sisters. Nathan smashed three glass tables and two lamps, broke some dishes, and drank for three days.

"I hit bottom," Nathan acknowledges. His remorse led him to spend two weeks in treatment at Cumberland Heights. After the first week, he telephoned Penny and begged her to join him. "Baby, this is our opportunity to get straightened out and work through our problems," he said. Penny's boss gave her a week off so that she could commute to Cumberland Heights for family treatment. "I learned a lot about myself at Al-Anon," Penny says. "I learned how sick I was, how much I needed to be my own person, that I had to stand up for myself when Nathan yelled at me or tried to switch words around in my head, and that I couldn't put my sobriety on his."

After two weeks, the Tomberlinds continued treatment at a Cumberland Heights center in their neighborhood. Penny asked their counsellor, Joy, if she could bring Brian with them. "At first, Joy said she didn't think an eleven-year-old would have the patience to sit still for two hours, but he was real quiet and he participated," Penny says.

"When I was asked to give a 'feeling word,' I did," Brian says. "I said I was scared when my parents started back using after four years, especially of Dad's cussing and yelling, and angry when they didn't listen to me, and glad when Dad went into treatment. I thought it would have a good result, because when he did it before it worked for a long time. And I learned that a lot of other people had troubles."

Joy told Penny that Brian astounded her—that he had handled a rough situa-

tion with a wisdom beyond his young years, and with a forgiving nature. "He's a kid hero," Joy said.

Sometimes the Tomberlinds eat a big buffet dinner at Cumberland Heights, but it costs six dollars apiece, and on this mild Sunday they don't have the money, so they go home and eat a big dinner, most of which has been simmering in Penny's Crock-Pot for five hours. Brian has an ample plateful of pot roast, turnip greens, carrots, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, peaches, and bread. "I like pickles, lemons with salt, Brussels sprouts, squash, okra, cabbage, corn, green beans, strawberries, and coconuts, and Nana's breakfasts," he says.

Nana is Nathan's mother. "She's the only relative I got who ain't messed up," Brian says. This spring, two of Penny's sisters, Nathan's only brother, and a cousin of Brian's were in jail for drug-related offenses.

Some of Brian's Super String 2 has got caught in the blades of the living-room ceiling fan. "Brian, get it off," Nathan says. "I told you not to do it, you don't listen, and you're stubborn, just like me." After Brian steps up on the coffee table, reaches up, and removes the strands, Nathan appends a "Thank you." Brian cleans his bathroom (a weekly chore), wheels his racing bike out of the storage room, and pedals across the street to Carl's house.

THE Tomberlinds live in a new eleven-hundred-square-foot ranch house with gray vinyl siding, which they are buying under the auspices of a Nashville community organization that is trying to keep their neighborhood from turning as commercial and desolate as an adjacent section. The house is on a street with other modest homes, public housing, and trailers. They live within earshot of the Nashville Speedway U.S.A., and on weekends they hear the roar of NASCAR races. Saturday nights, two neighbors tend to drink, brawl, and drive their own souped-up cars up and down the street, and other neighbors use and sell drugs. Brian has lived in ten small houses and apartments ("holes in the wall") and trailers since he was born. The worst one was a trailer where he slept on the top bunk of a double-decker bed and the first of Nana's two ex-husbands slept on the bottom bunk. "He drunk and he stunk," Brian says. His current home is "the biggest and best place," and the first house his parents have tried to buy. It has three bedrooms (one is being used as a storage room), two bathrooms, a living room/dining room, and a kitchen. The walls, which Brian helped his parents paint, are white. A glass dining-room table and four velour chairs originally belonged to Nana, as did the living-room sofa and a large chair. The few books the family owns are on the bottom rung of the TV stand, next to the VCR.

On Sunday afternoon, Brian and Carl ride their bicycles until Penny and Lisa, Carl's mother, are ready to go walking. They load the bikes—Brian's Mongoose Menace and Carl's Mongoose Expert—into the back of the black truck and drive a short distance to a track at an abandoned school. Penny, who is five feet seven and has long, fluffy, layered brown hair, has been overweight since her teens. Since she and Lisa started walking for thirty minutes a day several months ago—most weekends and most weekdays after Penny gets home from work—her weight has dropped from two hundred and twenty-two pounds to two hundred and seven. Brian welcomes a brief change of scene. Sunday evening his supper is crackers with peanut butter from a large can labelled "Donated by the people of the U.S.A. for Food Assistance Program," a surplus-food commodity that Nana's first ex-husband receives and passes along to him. Brian watches a video, one of four that Penny, after attending Overeaters Anonymous, rented for the weekend for four dollars and eighty-six cents. Although Penny is more concerned about her weight than about relapsing into drugs, pills, or alcohol, she and Nathan both go to a Cumberland Heights aftercare program one evening a week, and Nathan goes alone to three A.A. meetings a week. At nine, Brian looks at the clock, hugs and kisses his parents, and says, "Good night, I love you, sweet dreams, and say your prayers."

ON Monday morning, Nathan drives Penny to work. Since Brian was three, she has operated machines for a company that manufactures T-shirts, working "from eight-thirty to four-thirty and any overtime I can get." Then Nathan drops Brian off at Nana's apartment for breakfast and goes on to keep a doctor's appointment. Brian quickly and quietly puts away three fried eggs, two strips of bacon, three biscuits, and a glass of milk, carries his plate to the sink, and lies down on the living-room sofa to watch TV. He likes watching TV at his grandmother's. "We don't got cable or a remote control at home," he says, hopscotching the channels from "Family Challenge" to "Let's Make a Deal" and on to "Rugrats." At eight-fifteen, Nana drives Brian to Glenview Elementary School, which has three hundred and sixty-three students in kindergarten and grades three to six. Grades one and two are held at another school, because of a complicated court order desegregating Nashville's schools.

At the end of the 1994-95 school year, Glenview was forty-seven per cent white, forty-four per cent black, 6.6 per cent Hispanic, and 1.6 per cent Asian. Approximately twenty-five per cent of the students are bused from an inner-city housing project, and the majority of them are from single-parent homes. One of the four excuses that Glenview deems legitimate for an absence is "illness in the family requiring temporary help from the child." Glenview is a Title I school, one that qualifies for congressionally funded assistance, because it is among the schools that have a high concentration of children in poverty, meaning children eligible for free or reduced-price lunches—sixty-three per cent of the students, in Glenview's case. (Title I money and programs date back to 1965, as part of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty.)

BRIAN LEE TOMBERLIND is one of a million nine hundred and eight thousand twelve-year-old boys living in the United States. Like the overwhelming majority of them, he is white (eighty per cent) and he attends a public school (eighty-nine per cent). In 1995, Penny earned eighteen thousand and twenty-three dollars and Nathan thirty-seven hundred dollars. Those earnings, of twenty-one thousand seven hundred and twenty-three dollars, put the Tomberlinds in the bottom quarter of American wage earners but above the poverty line, which was twelve thousand one hundred and fifty-six dollars for a family of three last year. The Tomberlinds receive no subsidies from the federal government, but since Nathan's illness was diagnosed he has been on TennCare, a program that Tennessee created as an alternative to Medicaid, the federally financed health insurance for the poor and the disabled.

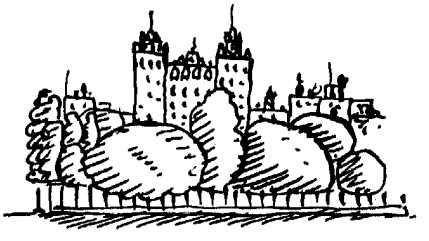
As a member of a three-person household with an income below twenty-three

thousand two hundred and ninety-two dollars, Brian qualifies for reduced-price breakfasts and lunches at Glenview, but Penny prefers to give him full-fare lunch money—a dollar and fifteen cents per day—to spare him the embarrassment that she felt as a child about receiving free school lunches. When Penny is short of cash, Nana provides lunch money. "I wouldn't mind getting free lunch if we needed it," Brian says. The kids at Glenview don't care who does or doesn't get reduced-price or free meals at school, but Brian says some of them taunt a boy in his class about his shabby clothes, because his mother spends most of her money on drugs. "The teachers are nice," he says. "They buy him clothes." Brian is not a teaser of others, because he is sensitive and good-hearted. "I wouldn't want no one talking about my clothes," he says. "It would make me feel bad." Brian is self-conscious about his wardrobe and was pleased that all his twelfth-birthday presents from his family were clothes: Nana bought him a gray sweatshirt with a hood and a pair of shiny navy nylon pants, and Penny bought him a pair of jeans. At any given time, he has about a dozen outfits in his closet and three pairs of sneakers—usually last season's model of a name brand bought for forty dollars or less at a discount shoe store.

THERE are twenty-nine students in Brian's homeroom. Two are currently in foster care—one girl because her father is in prison for murdering her mother; another girl spent last year in foster care. Several live with grandmothers, several with mothers and "bad stepfathers," many with mothers and "mean boyfriends," and many with single mothers. A few have been sexually abused. Very few live with their biological mother *and* father, as Brian does now. He was born Brian Lee Proctor and delivered by a midwife at Metropolitan Nashville General, a public hospital. He lived with his mother's family off and on until he was three. His parents married when he was four and a half, and his surname was then changed to Tomberlind. His parents occasionally separated, Brian always staying with Penny, but they got back together quite soon. Glenview calls itself a "high-transit" school. Of the twenty-nine boys and girls now in Brian's sixth-grade homeroom, only six others have been there since third grade, as he has.

Although Brian's situation is singular, his life and the lives of his classmates are representative of the few-frills lives of children of the working poor. The farthest that Brian has ever been from Nashville is Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, where he, his parents, and Nana spent a weekend in 1993. Middle-class customs are not ones he takes for granted. So far, he has had only three "cake birthdays"—birthday parties when he could invite other kids over for cake, ice cream, and fruit punch. And yet Brian Tomberlind is one of the three or four most fortunate youngsters in his homeroom, in that he has two parents who, despite the serious mistakes of their young years, have overcome their addictions: two parents who have stayed together and want Brian to have a better life than they have, and are working toward this goal—Penny by holding down a steady job and providing as many good times for him as she can, and Nathan by keeping him from such temptations as cheating and by trying to motivate him, sometimes by persuasion and sometimes by threats or punishment, to be a more diligent student. To Nathan, making Brian learn his multiplication tables is a symbol of the small victories that are possible in his world, and that are no less important for being small and thus perhaps attainable.

ON a breezy Monday morning, Ms. Grant—an attractive fifty-three-year-old transplanted Californian, with a daughter who works as a lawyer in Pasadena—who is Brian's sixth-grade homeroom teacher and is also his reading and spelling teacher, greets her students as they arrive, with "Hi, honey" and "Hi, sweetie." She asks how their weekends went and where their homework assignments that were originally due on Friday are. Brian and a number of his classmates hand theirs in. Others make excuses: "My mother made me clean my whole room," "I had to take care of my little sister," "My mother said I didn't have to do all of it," "I don't got none."



"You don't got *none*?" Ms. Grant asks.

"I don't have any," the last kid says as Ms. Grant pencils check marks next to the names of the non-homework-doers on a piece of paper. The students know the rules: ten homework checks (or behavior checks) and they're ineligible to attend the Incentive Party held every other Friday for the virtuous. If they turn the homework in late, though, the checks will be erased. "The bottom line is I want them to do their work," Ms. Grant says.

"I can't believe a parent wouldn't let a child do his homework," Brian says, almost wistfully, in a low voice to a friend. Nathan has recently told Brian that he can no longer go out to play after school on Mondays ("He wants me to settle in after the weekend") or Wednesdays ("It's the night my parents go to aftercare and I go along and sit in the cafeteria watching TV and drawing while they're in meetings"). Less play equals more time for homework in general and math in particular.

At eight-forty-five, a student in the Glenview office asks the students over the intercom to please get ready for morning announcements. First, the students observe "a moment of silence," mandated by the State of Tennessee. During the silence, some crack their knuckles, some doze off. After they recite the Pledge of Allegiance, they chant the Glenview Attitude Pledge, fifteen inspirational lines ("I know I'm capable of success / I am a learner and I can achieve / It's in myself that I must believe") composed by Ralph M. Thompson, who has been the school's principal since the fall of 1992. Next comes the vocabulary word of the week (" 'lavish'—hard work can lead to a lavish life style"), and a few reminders ("Please bring your school-picture money to the cafeteria"). By eight-fifty-five, Ms. Grant has taken attendance, and she now asks her class to line up. The students move single file, in alphabetical order, along a hallway wall to their first Monday class—Computers.

Glenview's computer room has twenty-nine Packard Bell computers, but ten of them are in disrepair, so the kids usually "partner up." They are not proficient on the computers; like Brian, twenty-four of his classmates have no computers at home, and they attend Computer class only twice a week. Today, they are not going to use the computers, because their teacher believes they need help with capi-

talization more urgently. In a few weeks, they will be taking annual achievement tests that are part of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program—the TCAPs, the tests are called—and Glenview wants its students to perform well. In a booming voice, the computer teacher reminds the class emphatically that days of the week, months of the year, street addresses ("like Animal Lane"), and proper names begin with capital letters.

Tuesdays through Fridays, Brian has Math (all academic subjects are taught four times weekly), but on Monday his next period is Reading. Ms. Grant says she wants everyone to choose a subject for a research report on an African-American man or woman—"and forget Michael Jordan or Michael Jackson and any other figures from the world of sports or entertainment." She goes through the five steps of the report, which range from "brainstorming" to "bibliography." When Brian has trouble coming up with a subject, someone proposes Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American on the Supreme Court. He asks what the Supreme Court is. He has heard of President Clinton but doesn't know when he was elected or which political party he belongs to. He has no idea where Bosnia and Israel are.

The students' discipline is good in Reading. If Ms. Grant doesn't like something she notices—for example, a girl wearing a low-cut dress, exposing cleavage—she tells the student that she is in violation of Glenview's dress code. The girl goes to the school office without protest, borrows a T-shirt, and wears it over the offending dress the rest of the day. (Most of the girls in the class are tall, a few are overweight, all wear bras.) When Ms. Grant spots a boy chewing gum, she pronounces his name deliberately and says, "You need to spit the gum out." He complies. (The boys come in a wider range of sizes, from small and slight to tall and heavy.)

Ms. Grant, who also taught Brian in third grade, is his favorite teacher, and he considers her a friend. This February 14th, he spent all the money Nathan could afford to give him on a big Valentine's Day balloon for her. On Brian's birthday, she handed him five dollars and a card in a report-card envelope. Brian doesn't realize that she gives five dollars to each of her sixth graders on his or her birthday.

On Monday, Reading segues into DARE, which stands for Drug Abuse Re-

sistance Education, a nationwide program. It is taught by Officer Bumpas, a uniformed Metro Nashville police officer, packing gold jewelry and a .38-calibre revolver. One Monday, she leads the class—she addresses the children as "sir" and "ma'am"—in a discussion of the ways in which people are pressured by the advertising media. She mentions products that are endorsed by celebrities and moves on to those with snob appeal. A student cites an ad for Grey Poupon mustard. Brian loves commercials. He raises his hand and offers another example—a commercial for Viennetta ice cream. "It shows fancy people's hands, and the women wearing pearl bracelets," he says. "There's fancy plates on the table, like china. And crystal cups, like wineglasses. And silver—it looks real. I'd like to try the ice cream, but not for the snob appeal, just because it looks good." In the category of "Having Fun," the DARE workbook shows a boy on skis, with the caption "Have a beer." Officer Bumpas asks what the picture shows and what it fails to show. Brian's hand is air-bound again. "It shows that in order to have fun you have to have a beer," he says. "It doesn't show if you're up on a ski slope with a can of beer you wouldn't ski well. Beer would make you mess up more or make you slower. You'd be better off without it." It is not a coincidence that Brian is more vocal in DARE than in any other class.

The last morning class is Language. One Monday, the teacher struggles to teach prepositions; another Monday, she wages a losing battle to teach the difference between "can" and "may." The students don't pay attention, and start talking to one another.

"Is there any reason you're acting like this?" the teacher inquires of a girl who has been restyling another girl's hair.

"Yeah, because we're bored," the girl answers.

The lunchroom is noisy. Brian eats his corn dog and baked potato, drinks his milk and his orange juice ("Sometimes there's Jell-O, but today orange juice is the dessert"), and talks to two classmates about basketball.

In Social Studies, the class is studying the Renaissance. Brian and his classmates read that Leonardo da Vinci painted "The Last Supper," and Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel. Asked if learning about artists in sixteenth-century Italy has meaning for him, he says, "Knowing about the Renaissance makes me feel better, because it makes me feel smarter."

Science, Monday's last academic subject, has always been Brian's favorite. "I like making things and experimenting, and I collect rocks," he explains. The teacher distributes compasses, many of which don't point north. "I think some fifth graders stuck magnets in them and messed them up," Brian suggests.

From two-thirty to three o'clock every day, Brian's class goes to Physical Education. One Monday, the P.E. instructor, Mr. Majors, who is a former college football player, explains cardiovascular fitness. Brian excels at P.E. "In fifth grade, I won an award for being second-fittest in the whole school," he recalls. "We did pushups, pullups, situps, and we ran. I think I'm fit because I play a lot."

If Brian sees a fight on the way home, he avoids it. He has the gift of minding his own business—a useful gift for gliding through a Glenview day.

At the Tomberlinds' dining table in the afternoon, Brian's approach to homework is to dispose of it as quickly as possible. When his Spelling assignment entails putting thirty vocabulary words into sentences, he spells the vocabulary word correctly but is careless about the spelling of other words he uses in his made-up sentences. "That pieace of cake is 'irresistible,' " he prints. (He has trouble writing in cursive.) And "Jason allways has to 'complicate' things." He avoids thinking up ways to use difficult words in sentences, and often puts the vocabulary word into a simple question, as in "What does 'predominant' mean?" and "What does 'gallant' mean?" He says he sees no point in trying harder: "Ms. Grant just looks at the homework and if you've used the spelling words you get an A. If you haven't, you get an F."

Nathan doesn't check Brian's homework, but he takes out the multiplication flash cards and asks Brian what seven times eight is. Brian hesitates, then gives an incorrect answer. Though Nathan appears angry, he doesn't preach to Brian, as he often does. Nathan was supposed to have an interferon shot yesterday and postponed it until today. Now, still dreading its side effects, he goes into the bedroom and prepares to give himself the shot.

Later, father and son discuss the fact that Glenview permits corporal punishment. Penny and Nathan have given their consent for Brian to receive it, if necessary, but Mr. Thompson has cut way back on it—from more than two hundred paddlings to twenty in his first year as principal, and thereafter to below a dozen. Mr. Thompson sometimes prevails upon the parents to come to school and do the paddling, which is limited to two licks with a nine-inch-long oval wooden paddle, kept in the school office. Brian has never been paddled, but he is well informed about the ritual. "I've heard the screams from the principal's office," he says. "The kids are usually hollering before they get there. You have to bend over and put your hands on the desk. They hit you on the butt. One boy was paddled by Mr. Thompson, because his mama wouldn't do it. She tooken up for him even though her child needed correcting."

Eakin Elementary School is six miles—and a social universe—away from Glenview. It has seven hundred and nine children in grades from kindergarten through six and classrooms in two old brick buildings situated near Vanderbilt University. Real-estate ads attempt to attract homebuyers to the neighborhood with the words "Eakin school district," because Eakin is among the city's most sought-after public elementary schools. There aren't quite enough local children to fill it, so parents with educational ambitions for their children enter a lottery for the out-of-zone slots. Sixteen of the twenty-nine students in Mrs. Hyde's sixth-grade class at Eakin have attended Eakin since kindergarten, twenty since third grade.

Both schools offer friendly environments and employ highly regarded principals and teachers—Glenview's Ralph Thompson was selected Nashville's Principal of the Year for 1993-94, and an Eakin teacher was chosen Tennessee's Teacher of the Year for 1994-95. The schools are distinguished in part by their differences. Eakin is less racially diverse than Glenview (it is 24.9 per cent black), and it describes the parents of its students as "middle income," with only seventeen per cent of the students receiving free or

reduced-price meals. There is no corporal punishment at Eakin, no moving from class to class or building to building in alphabetical lines. Discipline isn't a problem at Eakin. Twenty-two of Mrs. Hyde's twenty-nine sixth graders have home computers; most are knowledgeable about current world events; and a few are already talking about going to Ivy League colleges. By seventh grade, some will be attending private schools and others selective magnet schools. Only three of Glenview's seventy-five sixth graders will go to a magnet school.

Perhaps the most precise measurement of the socioeconomic advantages that Eakin's student body has over Glenview's shows up in the annual scores on the standard nationwide achievement tests, which are part of the TCAPs. In the spring of 1996, nine per cent of Eakin's sixth-grade students and twenty-eight per cent of Glenview's tested below average in Reading, Language, and Math (the national norm was twenty-three per cent); forty-seven per cent of Eakin's sixth graders and sixty-five per cent of Glenview's tested average (the national norm was fifty-four per cent); and forty-four per cent of Eakin's sixth graders and seven per cent of Glenview's tested above average in these skills (the national norm was twenty-three per cent).

When Brian Tomberlind was in kindergarten, most of his grades were satisfactory. A teacher commented on his report card in April, 1990, that he was still "a little unsure of his letters and some numbers," and urged, "Please work with him on this. He is a precious little boy." In first grade, when Brian first took TCAPs, he had mostly 4s and 5s in each skill the TCAPs tested, although in Science he scored a 9. (Scores in stanines 1 to 3 are below average, 4 to 6 average, 7 to 9 above average.) First grade is memorable to Brian "because I discovered there was no Santa Claus and I told all the other kids." In second grade, Brian's stanines, including Science, were mostly 4s and 5s. Toward the end of fifth grade, in April, 1995, his scores were all average except in Language (top of the third stanine) and Reading (bottom of the seventh). A sentence at the bottom of Brian's Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program report in 1995 states, "The student's total battery score is better than about fifty-three per cent of the national sample, and falls in the average range." This spring, he scored better than sixty-six per cent of the national sample—still in the average range.

"Thprinklth."

There are two children in Brian's homeroom who test above average and may therefore have a chance to overcome their disadvantaged situations and compete with the more privileged Eakin students. One is a first-generation Vietnamese boy with a gift for math and a cultural heritage of striving for academic success. The other is a black girl who loves to read. "I read after school, I read to the kids I babysit, and I read at night," she says. "My mother's worried about the electric, so I read in bed with just a night-light until eleven o'clock—my bedtime on school nights. My mother stays up until she sees my light go off. Weekends and summers, I can read as late as I want. I'm going to go to Vanderbilt."

While Brian isn't keen on reading, and his math TCAPs, in the thirty-ninth percentile, are subpar, Mr. Thompson thinks he has a number of qualities that will enable him to succeed—with or without a college education. "Most of our kids are in bad situations none of them are responsible for, and they show it," Mr. Thompson says. "Brian senses a lot of love from his father, his mother, and his grandmother. He's a consistent and a resilient child, and he knows how to insulate himself from disappointments. He's a survivor, and he's got character. Conventional wisdom has it that this generation isn't going to do as well as its parents. Brian is going to be an exception."

Asked if he expects to finish high school, Brian says "Yes," with calm but firm conviction. And what about college? "It's a long time off. But I would like to go to art school."

A CONVERSATION with Brian on a recent Friday afternoon in the Tomberlinds' living room:

"Brian, do you know what bad words are?"

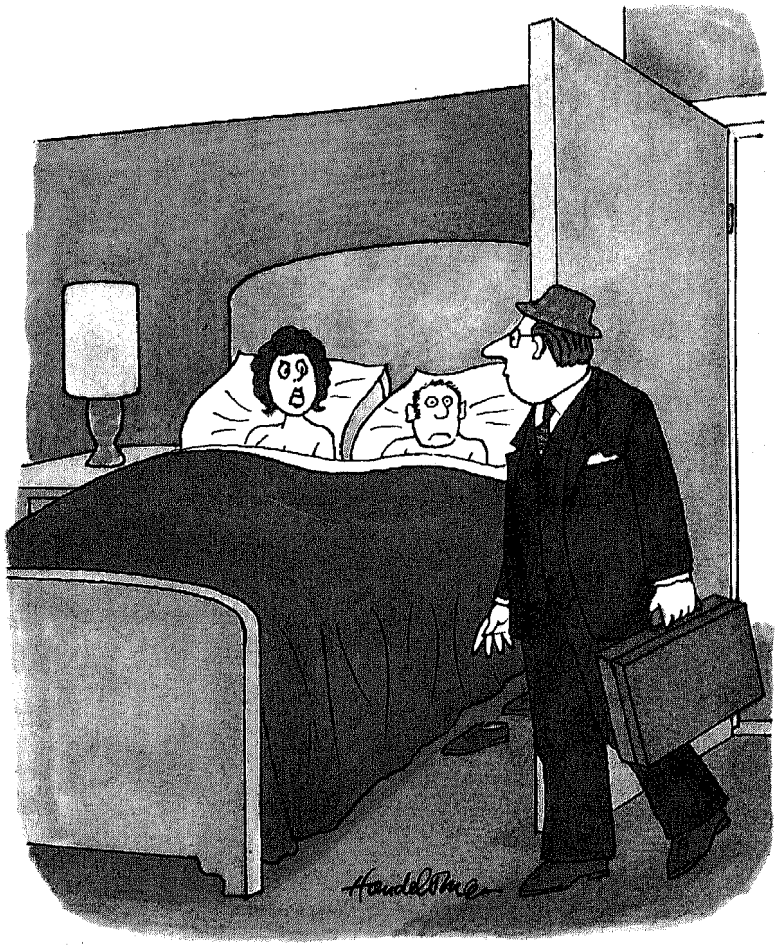
"Yes. My parents use them around the house, but they told me not to."

"Are you interested in girls?"

"Yes." He turns deep red.

"In girls you see on TV?"

"Mostly in girls I know. I took one girl to the movies when I was in third grade. Me and her sat in the front of the theatre, my parents sat in back. Last year, I took



"Oh, by all means, James—claim the moral high ground."

• •

another girl to a roller rink, but I stopped asking girls on dates, because I'm shy."

"Do you like to talk on the phone?"

"No. It makes me tired. It makes my ear hot. Maybe I'm not used to it. We got our first phone maybe three years ago."

"Where would you like to travel?"

"To Florida to see the Pacific Ocean."

"What effect has your father's illness had on you?"

"We don't do a lot, because he don't feel like it. And I worry he'll have to go to a hospital."

"What do you like to watch on TV?"

"Reruns of 'Seinfeld' and 'Home Improvement' with Mama when she gets home, and 'Roseanne,' 'Martin,' and 'America's Funniest Home Videos.' Sports."

"How do you feel about black people?"

"Same as I do about white people. There's some good and some bad."

"Who are some of the good black people you know?"

"My friend Jonathan across the street, lots of boys in my class, Mr. Thompson, Ms. Grant, Mr. Majors, and Officer Bumpas."

"What makes you happy?"

"When someone says nice things about me. When I get finished with my homework. When we go somewhere."

"What makes you unhappy?"

"When I can't go outside, but I'm not too unhappy, because I know it's not going to help me."

"How do you like being twelve?"

"I like it. I'm older. It's better than being eleven. You're taller. You can ride the go-carts at Snookers, out at Hickory Hollow Mall. At first when I got older and taller I didn't like not being able to play on the bars at Chuck E. Cheese no more."

"Are you looking forward to being thirteen?"

"Yes. I'll be a teen-ager."

"Will your life be better as you get older?"

"Yes. I'm going to work at Value Plus. I think you have to be fourteen or fifteen. I'll have money, and I could get more things that I want."

"What things are you having trouble getting right now?"

"A go-cart, but they cost between six and seven hundred dollars, and my mama still ain't paid Nana back the two hundred and forty dollars she put on her credit card for my bike. And an N.B.A. Jam game for the Super Nintendo that Sam gave me one Christmas. I only have two games for it—Super Mario World and Super Mario All-Stars."

"Will your life be better than your parents' lives?"

"I think so, because I'm never going to drink or do drugs. It's dumb. I seen what they done to my parents and most of my grandparents."

"Are you worried about the future?"

"Not really, because I'm going to go to art school and be an artist, and I hope I get to do it."

PENNY, who has been fixing tacos for supper, has heard part of the conversation. "Nobody ever says they *want* to grow up to be a drug addict," she puts in. "I wanted to take care of mentally retarded people. I love my job, but my first two years there I didn't know how to use the machines right and I had two carpal-tunnel operations. It's so important for me to have Brian graduate from high school. Me and all six of my siblings dropped out. Brian's said he wants to be an artist since he was three and a half and done drawings and took them to his grandfather and said, 'Pay me.' But he needs something to fall back on. He'll find his way. There's decent jobs for good people with high-school diplomas. Brian's Nana graduated high school, and she's earning eleven dollars and twenty-one cents as a security officer on the two-to-ten shift. That's good money for a woman in Nashville. I'm going to get the mortgage on this house paid off and give the house to Brian and his wife. I have a 401K savings plan. I let the company hold back three per cent of my pay—that's nine dollars a week. The company puts in twenty-five cents for every dollar I save. The man who explained the plan to us said the money would be reinvested and would grow to fifty-seven thousand dollars before I retire."

Nathan, who is smoking a cigarette after taking a shower, has also been lis-

tening. "I ain't never had no goals at twelve, but I didn't think of sitting around A.A. meetings," he says. "Roofing was O.K. but not steady. One job finishes, you got to find you another one. I don't want Brian to do that—Lord, no. I want him to be where he's warm in winter and cool in summer. I have dreams for Brian to get the best education he could—maybe, if he wanted, to go to college. I think there's better-paying jobs if a man can use his head instead of his physical strength."

After dinner, Brian is at the cleared-off dining table. He has paper, colored pencils, and the latest issue of the magazine *Lowrider* in front of him. He is looking at a drawing of a '47 Chevy and drawing his own version of it—on a slightly smaller scale and with tires that are square rather than round. "I guess my car has flat tires," he says.

Nathan is watching a video, and Brian goes into his room. It is furnished with a double-decker bed (Brian sleeps in the lower bunk and uses both mattresses on it, to make it more comfortable), a chest of drawers, a glass coffee table (its surface is cluttered with "my stuff"), a small TV, a stereo, and a radio. The room has a wide closet and a narrow window that faces a dog pen (occupied by the family dog until it got out and disappeared in February).

In April, Nathan stops giving himself interferon shots; his doctor agrees that they have not put the hepatitis C in remission. He doesn't regain any of the twenty pounds he has lost, but the chills and fever caused by the drug diminish, and his face is less pallid. He begins to receive monthly disability benefits, for which he filed in 1995, and which cover the family's phone and utility bills.

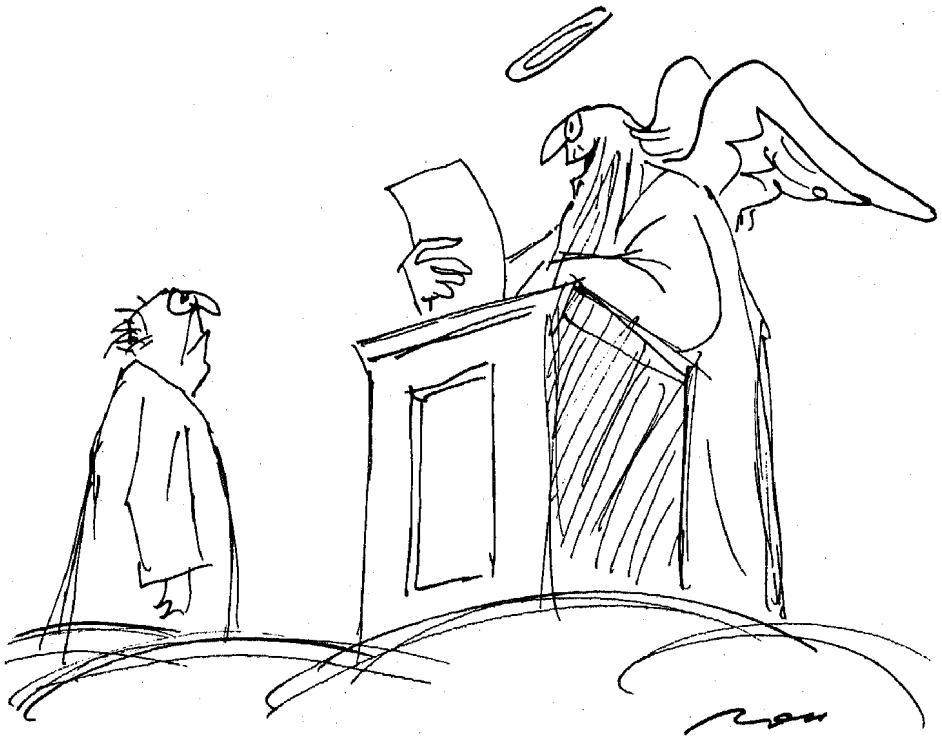
In the spring, Nathan no longer drives Penny to work and Brian to school—some mornings he can't get out of bed in time—but when he feels up to it he starts tilling a garden, goes fishing, or does some cooking. On Good Friday, he fixes a ham, and the day after he cooks "white beans with a bunch of ham and garlic in it." For Easter, he gives Penny money. "I bought me some underthings," she says. Penny's last clothing purchase, in late February, had been "three T-shirts, brand-new, and two pairs of jogging pants, at Goodwill, for a dollar eleven each." Penny grew up hard, with a father who worked, drank, and "tried to give us kids something for Christmas, even if it was only a piece of fruit." Penny is caring and likable—qualities that Brian has inherited. When money is tight, Penny does without and doesn't complain, and when there is a little extra she is grateful for it, as Brian is, too. In late March, an acquaintance of Nathan's gives Nathan and Brian some scrap aluminum, which Penny and Nathan sell at a recycling place for thirty dollars. Nathan and Brian give Penny the money for her birthday. She buys a pair of black Lycra bicycle shorts and a black T-shirt with Garfield the cat on it, at Wal-Mart. Brian earns twenty additional dollars doing jobs for Sam, the remodeller for whom Nathan used to work. Penny drives Brian to a flea market—Brian loves flea markets. He buys Nathan a lighter on a key chain for two dollars. "I hate it when Dad smokes, but he's always losing his," he says. He spends ten dollars panning for gold flakes and gems. "I really like to go panning, and this time I came up with a cut gem, black with a little orange on it, that's ready to be mounted on a ring for Mama," he says.

In May, Sam goes out of town for a week and offers the Tomberlinds the use of his houseboat. Nathan takes Brian out of school for two days, and Penny joins them on the weekend. Nathan nags him about his multiplication tables, but Brian studies them only halfheartedly. On May 30th, after Glenview's last full day of school, Penny tests Brian on his multiplication tables. She looks at the answers on the reverse side of her flash cards; her multiplication is iffier than Nathan's, and she is embarrassed that her ability to read is so limited. Brian gets most of the answers right. "I ain't as nervous around my mama," he says.

On May 31st, there is school from 8:45 A.M. to 11:30 A.M. One boy's mother fetches him at ten-thirty, and he waves goodbye. His classmates say nothing. At eleven-thirty, Ms. Grant wishes her sixth graders a good summer and asks them to visit her classroom next year. They leave nonchalantly.

Nana fetches Brian, and they go out to eat at a Po Folks. Nathan has been napping at his mother's, and they bring him back the hamburger he requested. He eats it, and she leaves for work. The television set is on, and Nathan is watching a science program. "What's seven times nine?" Nathan asks Brian as the show ends and a "Columbo" rerun begins. "Seven times nine is . . ." It is obvious that Brian is stalling for time, but time doesn't buy him the correct answer. "Go sharpen a pencil and write down your times tables," Nathan says.

Brian goes to the kitchen and starts opening drawers, in search of a knife.



"Ah, yes—Mr. Blenheim, and his obnoxious car alarm."

Nathan thinks that he is taking too long—that he is watching "Columbo" instead of searching with due diligence—and slaps Brian hard and noisily on the leg. "Next time, it will be with a belt, Brian," he says. Brian is sobbing. Nathan flies into a rage. "You didn't sharpen the pencil fast enough! I saw you looking at the TV! You can con your mother, but you can't con me!" he shouts.

Brian answers that he wasn't watching TV and he had trouble finding the right knife.

Back talk angers Nathan. "I've asked you your multiplication tables for the last few months," he says, and he continues firing words at his son: "You know the consequences. I'm tired of talking. I'm tired of being so patient with you. I'm tired of your crying all the time. You just talk, you don't take no action. I'm tired of your bluff. You won't go outside and play." He sends Brian, still sobbing, off to a bedroom to write the multiplication tables.

"I'm tired of Brian's bullcrap," Nathan says. "I don't think he takes me seriously. It hurts me when I hurt him. I hurt my left hand with my thumb."

Asked if he'll hit Brian with his right hand next time, Nathan answers, "Yes." Asked if he doesn't think he hit Brian a little too hard, Nathan says, "A whipping never killed me. I think kids take advantage of their parents, just like I did. They take your kindness and your generosity for weakness." And the appropriateness of slapping Brian on the last day of school? "The timing was just the way it was supposed to be. As far as I'm concerned, he's out of sixth grade and started the seventh today. Seventh and eighth grades are important years, and rough ones. Brian has to settle down and do his work hisself. The teachers won't have the time to work with him. My dad didn't care. He was only around a little when I started seventh grade. That's when my grades went down and I started getting high. I don't want Brian turning out like me. When Brian gets eighteen, it's his choice, but he's going to mind me as long as he lives with me. Brian may convince my mama or Penny that he's not capable of learning his multiplication tables, but I think he's very capable of learning them."

Asked if the only important thing in life is that eight times nine is seventy-two, Nathan, who is half-watching "Columbo" and is calming down, says, "It's hard being a parent."

Half an hour passes.

"Brian," Nathan calls to his son.

"What?" Brian asks, emerging from the bedroom with several pieces of paper, on which he has printed the multiplication tables more neatly than ever before.

"Brian, did I hurt your leg?"

"No."

"Did I hurt your feelings?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to ask you those multiplication tables on Monday, and if you don't know them you'll stay indoors all summer."

Brian nods.

On Friday, at 4:30 P.M., Nathan and Brian pick up Penny at work, stop briefly at a drive-in bank where she cashes her weekly paycheck—her take-home pay is two hundred and eighty dollars—and drive quickly downtown. Nashville's annual four-day Summer Lights festival started Thursday, and the Tomberlinds, Nathan included, all wanted to go. They have a nice time listening to bands, watching street performers, and eating corn dogs, roast corn on the cob, fried peppers, and sausages. Brian goes from Penny to Nathan and back easily. He is not afraid of Nathan. They get home around eleven o'clock. Brian, who is double-jointed, does marvellous acrobatic stunts on the living-room floor. All three Tomberlinds enjoy his performance. "We often have good times with each other," Penny says. "We've learned how to argue less."

On Saturday morning, after going fishing, Nathan says, "I should have counted to ten and cooled off a little bit before I hit Brian yesterday. But on Monday if he doesn't know the multiplication tables he's going to stay indoors all summer."

On Monday morning, Nathan drives Penny to work and fixes breakfast for Brian—lots of pancakes and crisp bacon. "O.K., Bubba," he says as they wolf down the meal. "What's seven times nine?"

"Seven times nine is sixty-three," Brian says, with conviction.

"And six times eight?"

"Forty-eight."

"What's nine times nine?"

"Eighty-one."

Victorious, Nathan hugs Brian. Victorious, Brian goes outside to play. ♦

SKETCHBOOK BY CARLOS NINE

GOOD OLD BOY

Fifty? Bill Clinton is fifty years old? It seems unlikely, but it is true, or it will be on August 19th. The first baby-boomer President will join the ranks of the first boomers to cross into the category of old age. He will be eligible to join the American Association of Retired Persons. (He will not, though, receive an invitation to it in his morning mail—a memento mori by mass marketing which brings dubious pleasure to multitudes of new demicentenarians each year—for the A.A.R.P. does not mail invitations to government buildings, of which the White House is one.) He will be entitled to senior citizens' discounts. After a lifetime as a white male, he will at last join a recognized victim group: like millions of others, he will be subject to the prejudices of ageism. In short, the President will be an old man.

This is odd, because he is so quintessentially a young man, so full of promise, appetite, charm, and himself. His winning qualities (his great energy, his many enthusiasms, his curiosity, his open-mindedness) are a young man's qualities, and his other qualities (his disorder, his short attention span, his trouble with his temper, his confidence that he can always talk his way out of a jam) belong to a young man, too. He has been conspicuously a young person's President. He plays the saxophone. He told MTV what sort of underwear he favors. He wears shorts in public. He eats like a teen-ager. Looking at him on television, you can still see in him the chubby kid in bluejeans, the earnest and eager adolescent shaking John F. Kennedy's hand in the Rose Garden, the boyish charmer of Oxford and Yale. It is true that he has graying hair, but on top of his mobile and still mostly unlined face it appears to be a not very good fake, like the silvery powder used to dusty up the hair of the lead in a high-school production of "Lear." It's a paradox of style. Michael Kinsley once wrote that Al Gore was an old person's idea of a young person; Bill Clinton is a young person's idea of an old person.

—MICHAEL KELLY