



## THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

June 20, 2001

Roger Rosenblatt considers life.

ROGER ROSENBLATT: The life you meant to lead. Remember that one? The painter you intended to become after years of study in Paris in your garret with that bath of spring light. Then more years working on oceans at Rockport, Mass., and still more in the springs section of Eastern Long Island, where all the other painters struggled, and you producing poor imitations of Picasso and de Koonig, whatever, until one sun-blasted morning, when you looked sideways at a canvas you were working on, and-- voila! Eureka! Wow! You've painted something new and different and wholly yours.

That was the painter you were meant to be, all right, but then there was the choice you made back when you did not become that painter, that detour you took to the life you have now. Or was it plain fright and cowardice in the face of a chance? No matter. The life you were meant to lead, you didn't. What do you think of that? Anne Tyler thinks of that in her latest, typically rich and multi-layered novel "Back When We Were Grownups," which opens with the sentence, "Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person." Is that possible? It is one thing to say that you shoulda, coulda, woulda become a painter, singer, acrobat, novelist, podiatrist, point guard, mother of five, but what constitutes the wrong person? Were you actually destined to become someone else? Is the wrong person what everybody becomes?

Jim Jeffords woke up recently to discover that he wasn't a Republican. I put it to you only as a challenge: The person you became is the person you were meant to be. I'm talking to you, Michael Jordan, the day you put on the Chi Sox baseball uniform and thought, "now, this is what I really am." Or, for the sake of argument, I put it to you that no life fits the one who lives it, that every road taken should have been the other one, and ain't that too damn bad? "Imagination is funny. It makes a cloudy day sunny." It makes for Kevin Spacey in "American Beauty" or for "being John Malkovich" or for Bellow's "Henderson

the Rain King." Poor Gatsby had to sit by while Daisy told him that you can't undo the past. "Of course you can," said Gatsby, who meant it down to the mother lode of America. It's an American story, after all, perhaps the American story, told over and over. "Peggy Sue Got Married" unhappily, then was transported back to high school, where she fell in love with Nicholas Cage all over again. But Nicholas Cage himself made the most of his second chance in the movie "Family Man." In "Back to the Future," Michael J. Fox takes advantage of time travel to turn his future father into the man his mother deserves. Woody Allen said recently that he would have preferred to be Louis Armstrong or Sugar Ray Robinson.

Sometimes we bring in the devil for makeovers. I myself never wanted to write essays. I wanted to write plays or play basketball or be a jazz pianist and accompany myself while I sang. How about it, Satan? In the market for one slightly damaged soul?

ACTOR: To my big brother George, the richest man in town.

ROGER ROSENBLATT: Reporter: Identity searches are usually a set-up for realizing that you really did have the best life possible after all, the lesson of "It's a Wonderful Life," made secure every Christmas. And that may be true for all us dreamers, of course. And then again, it may not. In any case, the tantalizing question may be more satisfying the answer, though it gets more difficult the more you dwell on it. If you actually knew the life you were meant to lead, knew that it fit like a glove, would you, in fact, start over and lead it? How much do you want to be you? Regrettably, and not, I'm Roger Rosenblatt.



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