The husband tells the story. An overnight visitor, a blind man, is about to arrive at the house where the husband lives with his wife. The visit will be a reunion for the blind man, whose name is Robert, and the wife. Many years ago, married to another man, she used to read to Robert. At their last meeting before she and her husband moved to another state, Robert asked if he might touch her face. This was long before her present husband ever knew his wife, but even now, thinking of this moment of tenderness, he explodes. ("She told me he touched his fingers to every part of her face, her nose - even her neck!") And now "this blind man" is coming to visit. Over the years Robert and the wife have "kept in touch," mailing cassette tapes back and forth. Each recollection increases the husband's anxiety.

The conscious focus of this anxiety is Robert's blindness itself. ("He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to.") Why should this overnight visit warrant such anger? What is the husband so frightened of? As soon becomes evident, he does have much to be frightened of and angry about. We learn that he hates his job. He and his wife are no longer intimate; in fact, their relationship is a fierce one, there is yelling, throwing things. And when he alludes to his friends, she snaps back, "You don't have any friends." Now, the husband's various hurts are gathered together and displaced onto his blind guest. This is the minefield into which Robert walks.

It is hardly a surprise that when Robert arrives, everything his host says is wrong. So out of turn are the statements and questions which tumble out that they must be involuntary. "Which side of the train did you sit on?", he asks. (Unperturbed, Robert answers, "Right side.") Mostly though, the husband is silent, defensive, wary. His wife, understandably, is on edge. Robert is serene, open, at ease with himself and with the married couple.

Hearty eating compensates for the difficulty of conversing. ("We dug in. We ate everything there was to eat on the table. We ate like there was no tomorrow. We didn't talk. We ate. We scarfed. We grazed that table. We..."
were into serious eating." ) Set in the center of the manic list of synonyms for eating, the one negative sentence, "We didn't talk" stands out. They drink a lot too. ("It's one of our pastimes.")

The husband's way of telling the story calls attention to itself. It is aggressive, demotic, self-mocking. He is very good at this skaz, which functions for him as a defense mechanism. It is his way of ironizing and trivializing his world, denying its complications, and, most important, keeping self-knowledge at arm's length. At some level, just beneath consciousness, it appears that he does understand that his verbal style does not defend, but imprisons him. His dismissal of his wife's and Robert's efforts to keep in touch belie a yearning to break out of his own distancing way with the world. ("She told him everything, or so it seemed to me." ... "She wrote a poem or two every year, usually after something really important had happened to her.")

Some time after dinner, the wife falls asleep on the sofa. Now the two men are alone, with nothing to say to one another. They smoke a joint; the leftover evening is winding down. In the background, the TV is on; the program is a documentary about cathedrals. The husband takes it upon himself describe to Robert what he is seeing on the screen; even at this level of mere descriptive adequacy he fails.

But Robert hears the TV narrator say that cathedrals were always being built, and were never completed. "In that wise," he says, "... they're no different from the rest of us." Perhaps because of this connection that he makes between cathedrals and ordinary life, the subject has captured his attention. He asks the husband to try again to describe a cathedral; the blind man has never seen one. The husband regards the request as if "my life was being threatened by an insane guy who said I had to do it or else."

As it turns out, Robert's request, his invitation to conversation, is a godsend. The husband racks his brain "to remember what [he] ... could remember" about cathedrals. He remembers that "[i]n those olden days, when they built cathedrals, men wanted to be close to God. In those olden days, God was an important part of everyone's life." He remembers that cathedrals are massive, that they reach "[u]p and up." The subject moves in a natural way to the subject of personal belief. Robert speaks first: "[L]et me ask you if you are in any way religious?" The husband answers "Sometimes it's hard. You know what I'm saying?" "Sure I do", Robert answers. "'Right', I said." No matter that the dialogue is unsure, almost inchoate, that, like most conversation, almost nothing of substance is exchanged. It seems that the two men are building something.

But as his halting language suggests, the husband's manner of speaking