

My Path to Greatness

Part One: In the Long Ago

Long before I came to any knowledge of Jane Thayer or fully embraced that I wasn't among the brightest stars in the firmament and before my parents and two of my sisters made themselves invisible on the earth, there is my childhood room overlooking Broadway, along which the cars and trucks and buses of the city are given the right of way to race along, not as they please but within the guidelines of the traffic lights installed to impose a kind of order, a sorrow suffusing me that the trolleys cannot be there too in the time that I have come into but had to be retired in the relentless current of change the world has not found a way to resist.

Before the bad people came we lived in a palace bigger than any ocean, with rooms that sparkled. Jewels hung from our necks and gold lace shone in our hair and the radiance of springtime was always in our lives and frankincense and myrrh were at our disposal. In chariots we rode and slept in bowers of bliss and drank the milk and honey of the land.

"Don't exaggerate, my son. But yes, how beautiful it was," Momma says, while braiding her long brown hair by the full-length mirror in the vestibule.

"Why did the bad people come?" I ask.

"Because there is iniquity in this world. There always has been and always will be, until Jesus returns, like a thief in the night," Momma says.

“What is iniquity” You can always ask Momma a question, and the answers she gives are all her own.

“Iniquity is when the heart lives without Jesus and is filled with dark purpose.”

“And why would he come like a thief in the night?”

“Because it is for thieves to live for surprise. And Jesus too will be a big surprise. And so you must be ready for him with a soul whiter than snow when the clouds part and Judgment Day arrives.”

Momma talks this way. She is on fire for the Lord and says Jesus wants *me* for a sunbeam.

Momma sleeps in a big mahogany bed, in the room next to mine. When I wet my own bed and the warm pee turns cold in the night, I go to her and lie next to her warmth. There is the endless softness of Momma in which to lose myself and the brittle hardness of my father on the other side. In the morning I wake in their bed to find him staring down at me, his arm across my chest like an iron bar. He is smiling, as if I am an insect he had caught and is now closely examining. It is everything for me not to struggle, though I can feel a sense of panic rising. Smiling or not, my father’s face, with that big nose full of hairs, has the dark purpose Momma spoke about.

“Are you my good son?” my father asks, as if he has some doubt.

“I am,” I say.

“You are what, my son?”

Though I feel my own smile giving way and a scream coming, I manage to say, “Your good son.”

“And does my good son want to get up?”

“I am OK,” I say, knowing I must not say yes, yes, please let me run off to the open spaces where you are least and even not at all. Please let me go into the life of freedom I must have before your violence unfolds in a perishing act. Please do not trap me here forever so I can never live. Because if the panic that is beginning to rise is allowed to show, the consequences will have to be severe. The iron bar would press harder against my small chest and the smile would vanish from my father’s ancient face and the extermination process would have to begin.

And there it is, his arm lifted like those zebra-striped crossing barriers in front of railroad tracks.

My father is saying there is a price for Momma’s bed, and the price could be my *life*.

My father is not my father. I say this one morning to myself. I am Momma’s son, her Svenska pojke, as she calls me. I can wear the blue and yellow and white of Sweden and not be burdened with the blackness of the land of rats from which my father comes.

The truth is, if I am to go back to the beginning, at which I can never seem to arrive, I was in Momma’s room before I was in the room next to hers. A cot had been placed behind her bed, where I was to sleep. I know, because I would lay there, my head bursting with sums I could not manage—long division and multiplication and all the rest. A sinking feeling would come over me that would cause me to cry and cry, as if I were falling into a hole from which I could never escape while life moved on, leaving me behind and all alone.

“Trust in the Lord Jesus,” Momma said. “He will take care of your every need. The nighttime is Jesus time, my son. All the time is Jesus time, my son.”

My older sisters, Rachel and Naomi, were in the room next to Momma's back then. I would hear Naomi's voice rising in song to Rachel's accompaniment on the old upright, sheet music on the stand in front of her. It was the voice of the world with its worldliness sounding, bright and sassy Broadway singing its show tune best in defiance of the flames to come. No mournful "Old Rugged Cross." No tearful "In the Garden." It accelerated past "Bringing in the Sheaves" to establish itself on the gayest corner of life, where the world in all its splendor had come to gather. Hard-hearted Hannah? Was Naomi going against my oldest sister with words? Was Rachel collaborating? And what was a vamp, and what should it be doing in Savannah? They frightened and thrilled me with their accessibility to the places I had not gone. To hear them summoned a rush of excitement but one that did not allow me to draw near them. Their smiles were not so much friendly as fierce, signaling they were intent on a victory that belonged only to them.

Though Momma said those songs were from the world and had not the sound of God in them, to me they were the light of hope that Rachel and Naomi could be in the world enough to bring them into our home, because even then the world was something I wanted more than the Jesus I knew to fear.

Naomi and Rachel did sometimes go against Hannah with words. "Poor Hannah. Can't leave home...Have you ever seen such big feet? They're bigger than Daddy's... Daddy is Hannah's boyfriend..." And then, because Hannah was riled, they had to go against her with fists and nails, the two of them scratching and punching and pulling out Hannah's hair and Hannah doing the same to them.

Rachel wore her hair in a long braid, the same as Momma made using the full-length mirror by the front door. Momma combed out her long, long hair before braiding and wrapping it around her head. But Rachel allowed the braid to hang down, thick and long, like Rapunzel. She would come home cradling a stack of schoolbooks against her chest, as if they were where her treasure truly was. The room she shared with Naomi was like no other in the world. She slept on a sea of books, four or five deep on the floor, with her eyes open on their pages. To Rachel this was not disorder but a sign of plenty. Momma was proud of Rachel as her shining star and had high hopes that she would take her place as a great nation of the world.

Rachel would strike me in my infant years—“That is what you deserve for being such a little Flathead,” she would say, in delivering her blows—and so Momma tried to keep her away. “The light of love is in Rachel, even if she doesn’t show it,” Momma said. She put me in the care of old Bessie Floxley. Bessie lived farther uptown. She let me climb in and out of her ground-level window, and would take me through the swinging doors of the tavern down the block, where everyone knew her name and I could play on the sawdust-strewn floor.

Bessie was alone in her apartment and her life. When she became ill, Momma took me and my older brother Luke to visit her on Wards Island, a strip of land in the East River. An overwhelming stench met us as we entered the open ward and stared at the endless rows of beds and the pale, ailing specimens lying on them. The unmistakable smell of sickness and of death remains with me, and the horror that people could be grouped together, with no privacy, in such a way. I couldn’t get away soon enough, and was astonished that Momma had brought me in the first place.

Even if Naomi and Rachel did call me “Little Flathead” because the back of my head was amazingly flat and gave me hard slaps across the face for being such a little Flathead, they were my sisters, with the magic powers that older sisters possess. When darkness came, they would go to the movies down at the Nemo Theater on One Hundred Tenth Street and Broadway and the Loew’s Theater three blocks farther south against the express wishes of Momma, who said moving images of that kind were worldly and a sin. And so, picturing these sisters with their worldly way, I could now have the hope that there would come a time when I too was out on a cool, star-filled night.

Not only did Rachel want the world, but the world wanted her, too. She found out that she had been *chosen*. She would be going to college farther up the Hudson River than where we were in Manhattan, a place where there were trees and country spaces that the trains ran through. That the college was famous for its excellence was more than my mind or any mind should be asked to bear.

But Naomi didn’t go to college. She had a change in her life that required Idlewild Airport. The propellers were whirling on the tarmac so she could prepare to get married. There was a family out in Chicago waiting to see who she was.

The marriage itself took place without my presence when Naomi returned. The information came through Momma and my father dressing up and the word *reception*. Naomi wore a gown of white to show that she was new and the flowers on hand would not be for any grave. Some world beyond where I stood was going on. But Naomi getting married did not bring me the same happiness as Rachel going off to college. A feeling of suffocation came over me when I saw the wedding photos. There were too many people wearing too many clothes in too small a room.

Naomi's husband's name is Chuck. It is a name that requires big teeth. His army jeep overturned in France, causing him to drink all the wine the country had to offer. But now his mind is equipped for mathematical study at Columbia University, where he is earning something called a doctorate.

Momma has given Naomi and Chuck room 9C3 because they both have conditions that require this arrangement, she says. And so Chuck can be productive as a husband, he nightly sits in the lobby in one of Auntie Eve's upholstered armchairs. He is there to guard the security of her furniture so it does not disappear and to be a witness to everyone entering and leaving the building during the hours of sleep. While on duty he talks in a crabby voice, seeking to snare people with his song of lamentation. His face says things have been done to him of which he barely knows how to speak. Several bottles of wine, the kind that have no cork in them, are to the side of the chair, so he can always have the taste he needs at hand. He has a way of reaching down and turning the cap left and right on the bottle without removing it just so he knows the drink is at hand. Complicated interaction with his cigarettes is also going on. He lights up a Pall Mall and draws slowly upon it, to make the burning tip the brightest of things. The night is a time for his reflection, and the wine and the smoke work together to help him do that so he can be orderly in his mind and his life.

Chuck walks with his chest out and never ever to be in retreat from that which confronts him. Naomi says he is a cut above the rest with the mathematical power of his intellect.

"Wine is a mocker; strong drink is raging," Momma says.

"Why is wine a mocker?" I ask Momma.

“Because it saps the strength of the living, deceiving the drinker as to its real intent, and sends him to an early grave.”

“How does it do that?” I ask.

“It is a spirit with an evil intent, my son. You must listen to me when I speak. Never let it be that my words mean nothing to your ears. Have I not told you about my father back on the farm in Sweden, and how my mother would send me out into the snow to find him, and when I did, how I would smash the bottles he drank from against the rocks before getting him home so the cold could not terminate him from this earth? Have I not told you how I followed my mother’s instruction in the spirit of anguished love in which she gave it?”

Naomi is my pretty sister of darkness. In the lobby she also appears, singing her Judy Garland songs at a fever pitch to the tenants as they come and go. Naomi would be a star of stage and screen and apart from the fire and brimstone base on which she was bred.

Momma says it is the doctors’ fault that Naomi cries and passes out, so the ambulance has to come. Momma says the doctors give her pills she doesn’t need.

“Listen, little Flathead. I just want you to know that my husband, Chuck, is a big strong man, a real man. He’s the one to keep you in line, so don’t try getting fresh with me or giving me any trouble, because you can believe that he will give you all you need if you do.” So Naomi says to me from the dark place where her mind goes.

Chuck does not come to our apartment. He made my father get up the one time he did visit. My father pursued Chuck out the door with his smacking hand high above his head.

The room I was given after Naomi and Rachel left has a window with a screen so I cannot fall down upon the avenue it looks out upon, and on which the election trucks of the men who would be president roll past. These trucks are festooned in red and white and blue bunting. The music of America plays over a loudspeaker so the right people will be chosen to run the country and no one will get hurt in the chaos that would otherwise ensue.

Auntie Eve came from Sweden to put us here in the building. Auntie Eve has a fine mind, Momma says of her older sister. Sweden, if you don't know, is north of Europe and has people in it whose eyes are blue and hair is blond, like the colors of its flag. Sweden is where the lingonberries grow, the same lingonberries Momma places on the pancakes that she has me take to Miss Hansen some mornings. "Run on your long legs now, while the pancakes are still warm," she says.

Miss Hansen has the same room as mine, only on the third floor. She is different from some of the other older women who have rooms in the building. With her beaked nose, she is like a big bird. Already, at eight in the morning, she is standing in her smock at the easel with a paintbrush in her hand. Some of her framed watercolors hang in the lobby next to verses of scripture Auntie Eve likes to hang as well.

Momma says that when my grandfather died, there was no reason for Auntie Eve to stay on the farm. The snowstorms blew in all the time and it was dark for so long and there was America, beckoning like a warm fire. America took Auntie Eve in and gave her a job as head nurse at the local hospital before she purchased the building where my family came to live. And America would have given Auntie Eve more, only people were

mean to her, Momma says. They made fun of her and took away what was rightfully hers in a way they weren't supposed to do.

“They reviled her, my son,” Momma said.

“Reviled?”

“They scorned her. They heaped on her abuse. They treated her like dirt beneath their feet.”

“But why?”

“Because she was a Christian and walked with the Lord and they didn't, not even the ones who said they did. The Crucifixion is not a one-time thing. Your aunt is a saint. She did not die on the cross at Calvary but in her own heart to the aspiration that it had created, and yet she got to live again in the renewal of the spirit. Because no one can kill the Christ. No one. The Christ lives and lives and lives, and burns where no extinguishing water can possibly go.”

Sometimes Momma is a roaring river named Conviction sweeping you along.

There is another window. It faces south out on a small yard where there is a recess in the building. Momma put no screen on the window because the courtyard is level with my room, and so I could not fall and fall and fall to the death that comes from broken bones. From the floors above bags of garbage arrive, making a popping sound as they break open in the yard. Momma says it is the lazybones upstairs who can't bother to throw their trash in the incinerator, though no one knows exactly who they are. People from all over the world come to us: the Indians, the Sikhs, the Pakistanis, the Koreans, the Chinese with their mathematical minds. They are here to get the education they need to make their countries work in the way that they should, with modern bridges and

roadways and trucks that can drive over them full of rampaging purpose. They are here in the full state of their ambition, Momma said.

Momma sends me out into the yard with a broom and a shovel and a big box to sweep and sweep so order can be restored. I sweep long and I sweep hard, with the efficiency I am capable of showing, while practicing heads-up vigilance against the gifts the air-mailers routinely send. Nothing means as much to me as a good sweep, so the yard can be restored and my mind can be at peace that order has prevailed.

My childhood is my own. It is where I rest and find the nourishment that I can.

My brother Luke was born before I came. He is loud and does not know to put caution into his ways. My father hits him hard with his hands of death and my oldest sister Hannah, older even than Naomi and Rachel, does the same. They hit him in the bottom bunk of the bed in which we sleep. They hit and hit, beating his rebellion in the night without a thought to what it will look like in the day.

At night Momma comes to me in her endless softness, which I go into and want never to come out of. She comes to me with the love that is her way, and though she is not in white, she is always in raiment of white when she appears. She is Momma, walking with me and talking with me and calling me her very own; Momma, without whom I would have to die and with whom I can live and live so long as she keeps seeing me above the clamor of the world that she says has sometimes to take her away. Every night she says that prayer I cannot say to myself. "Now I lay me down to sleep, the Lord I pray my soul to keep. If he should come before I wake, the Lord I hope my soul to take," the spoken words moving me further into her softness.

If Momma says we must not fall into worldliness because Jesus could come like a thief in the night, then Pastor Cohn, at the downtown tabernacle, says it differently. “We must be lucrative in the Lord,” Pastor Cohn says, those words some of the few I can catch among the many of his that disappear.

All children and everyone else who wants to stay alive should have ears for their fathers when they come through the doors at night. Always mine are alert to the sound of my father’s footsteps when darkness has fallen and I lie in my bed. In the distance can I sense him approaching on streets foggy and forlorn, his aloneness fully preserved. My father has come to America from some faraway land of the dead where abandoned castles survive the centuries. On his huge feet are wingtip shoes, and his big body is clothed with a Robert Hall suit (“When the values go up, up, up/ and the prices go down, down, down/ Robert Hall this season will show you the reason/ High quality! Economy!”). A wide tie, a heavy overcoat, a fedora—these too are the apparel of my father, who wishes to show himself in the garb of prosperity in living the dream of America. My father is a man of Forty-second Street. My father is an Armenian, with all that can ever mean.

He is in the apartment now. His footsteps come nearer and nearer. Have I done something today to deserve him? Are annihilating impulses once again ruling his land? Or will he go to the other room across the hall, where Momma sleeps in sweet peace with an aura of light all around her?

And yes, the love of Momma pulls my father to her and not me. He has no need to vanquish my small nation on this night.

It is not nothing to fall asleep in a room overlooking Broadway. Nightly will a fast-moving light lap the ceiling before moving to the center, where it thickens and

descends to the floor in a ghostly luminous shape. “Errara man, errara man,” it shouts, driving me from my bed and through all the rooms of the dark apartment in a state too terrified to make my voice heard to those so near. What can stop the tormenting pursuit by the er-ra-ra man, so close to touching me so that I will have to die? Nothing. Nothing but waking up to blackness, the air still throbbing with his unseen presence.

In the morning I am allowed to wake to the brightness of the sun pouring in from the east without the roll of thunder or the parting of the sky. I cry and cry with delight that the throne of judgment has not been established, that the roll had not been called way up yonder, that the fire that burns hot and everlasting is not upon my skin in the forevermore proposition of hell. Surely mercy has a chance of following me *all* the days of my life, and I won’t receive what I so truly deserve, as Pastor Cohn says.

“Your mother is my rock. I have no idea what would have happened to me if I had not found her,” my father says to me at the breakfast table. The burner is on under the coffee pot and the smell of Savarin regular grind coffee, from the red can, is strong. Soon the coffee is percolating, bubbles blooming hot against the cone of glass in the lid. In the deep sink, black metal showing under the worn away enamel, my father has washed cups and plates.

My father is tired. It shows in his long face. He has traveled long and hard from the land of rats and pestilence called Armenia, a land drenched in saliva and littered with corpses, a land without a flag or the blond and shining faces of my mother’s Swedish nation. Armenians are hairy and obscene. They make you run away from them to the safety of America. Even my father runs from the Armenians, shunning their company while maintaining old country ways in hanging those rugs on the bedroom wall.

Momma comes to the table in a white terrycloth robe. Her brown hair, which later she will braid, hangs down, and her eyes look smaller with her face free of glasses.

“Eisenhower is the only answer. This other man, Stevenson, he does not understand the world,” my father says, his white chest hairs visible in the V of his dark green robe and his nose curving down toward his mouth.

“I see,” Momma says.

“He is too friendly toward the Communists, who would take everything from us, including God.”

“Is that so?” Words like these Momma speaks in reply. Both my father and my mother read the Bible, but my father also reads the *New York Times*. Momma depends on him to explain the world. Both my father and Momma wear deep rich Republican blue. The Republican Party is the Bluecoats of the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln and Grant’s Tomb. It is the granite with which buildings of worth and substance are built. It is the Grand Old Party on which the country was founded. It is a time I do not know but wish I did because the past is where you can be alone with your life.

Momma pours heavy cream from a half-pint container into her coffee, creating a warm and friendly brown, and sips from the china cup that is for her alone, an indication that Momma knows finery when she wants to. In the corner, where my father sits in his black wicker chair, the toaster is busy. Nothing in the world is better than rye toast drenched with butter and topped with strawberry jam. Nothing.

“I have great fear for the country if the Democrats win. They don’t mean the country well. They are too friendly with the Communists.”

“I see,” Momma says, as if her eyes are being opened, though she says the same many mornings,

Momma met my father in Central Park, where he was out walking. He came here from Boston after being in Marseilles, France, and Nice, France, and Paris, France, where he studied at the Sorbonne. Momma has told me all this, seeking to explain the mystery of my father and make him someone I can see.

On the wall behind us is a photo of my father and mother in the long ago. They are sitting on a hill. My father has his jacket off and is wearing a shirt and tie. My mother is wearing a dress and the sweetness of her smile is showing in her face.

Hannah, my oldest sister, comes, bringing a noisy silence into the room. Her face is boiling with peeve. The table is small and Hannah is large, and so she sits apart, the light of laughter far away from her.

“How did you sleep, Hannah?” Momma asks, for she is always on the side of goodness.

“Who cares how I slept?” Hannah replies, having no regard for the eggshells underfoot with the nasty tone she takes. Dressed for the office work that she sometimes does, Hannah has come from the room outside the apartment where Momma has graduated her to live.

“Ushtah, Hannah. Must you speak in such a way?” Momma can have conviction, but she never ever has rudeness.

“I’ll talk any way I please,” Hannah says, continuing to go against my mother with her words and tone.

“Hannah, can we not be reasonable?” Momma seeking to draw from the well of understanding she says is in all of us.

“Just leave me alone with your reasonable.”

“Hannah, do you know where you are?” my father says, pausing with the toast-making operation to tend to the rebellion at hand.

“I know where I am. Do you know where you are?” Hannah says right back, not caring any which way for my father’s cautioning words but frying the air with her sound.

“Are you trying to aggravate me?” My father has now sent a clear sign that the anger percolation has begun.

“When are you not aggravated?”

“Hannah, please. Do you wish me to be ill?” my mother asks.

“Will I be made to get up?” my father asks, the words he speaks before battle.

How can Hannah be so reckless with her own life, and endanger those of others? Does she not know that violence, once unleashed, can never stop?

“Don’t you so much as put a hand on me. I’ll have the police on you if you do,” Hannah shouts.

“The police? Do you not know that in my country you would be stoned to death for talking in such a way to your father?”

“We’re not in your goddamn country,” Hannah answers back, rising from her chair.

Truly does Hannah make my father get up. Truly does he give chase to my fleeing sister. And truly is there terror that the whole world has to be called upon to share as I witness Hannah streaking for the front door with my father right behind her in his old

green robe, his right hand in the high, pulverizing smacking position that the most serious offenses call for. But suppose, as in the stuff of dreams, the front door does not open? Suppose it shows the contrary spirit that the inanimate can summon and remains viciously locked against all negotiation and the hard smacks begin? Suppose Momma, screaming and imploring, falls down dying while pursuing her mission of mercy? What is this terror that has visited the earth to make my knees go weak and my breath to flee so not even a gasp is possible?

But the door is not hostile to Hannah's well-being; it does not thwart her in her moment of need but opens easily for her escape. And yet, for those of us who remain, the vibrations that have been set forth last for an eternity, like an engine that shudders and shudders forever when the ignition has been turned off.

"Your father has a condition as well as a fine mind. He cannot handle stress," Momma later says, seeking to make my father known to me. "The Virginian, The Californian, The Iowan, The Texan. The names of the downtown restaurants where your father has worked as an expert cashier are many. Your father could have a book written about him. Your father could be a book. He has that kind of mind, and the noble attributes that only the afflicted can possess. That is why the restaurants always, always take him back after he has stormed out, and why he can't be made to stand for treason for his angry excesses. Because a condition is a condition and has a right to expect respect for its own existence. A condition lasts for the life of its owner and then is passed on to whoever is chosen to wear it. Do you understand what I am saying, my son?"

"Momma, the way you talk," I say. "But who is Hannah, and why is she still here with her dark moods that travel through the walls?"

“Your sister is ruled by her fire and has been on this earth for a long, long time. Have you heard of the Great Depression, my son, when the whole world had not one nickel? In this time was she born. We had no building such as now to live in, but only a basement dwelling, and in truth in a basement was the whole world dwelling. Your father was out of work because no jobs were to be had while I worked as a domestic in the employ of a Park Avenue family. I have never been afraid of a little dirt, my son. I grew up on a farm and know the smells that animals manufacture as well as those of the lilac bush. My hands are rough and my spirit is strong and the world has nothing that I want, not even its good opinion. Into the poverty that gripped the nation was Hannah born, with your father having to watch over her while I worked for this Park Avenue Jewish couple. Yes, they were Jews, my son. No one has fine minds like the Jews have fine minds. That is why Jesus was a Jew, my son, because only a Jew could bring the light of love into the world in the way that he did. It was for your father to bathe Hannah and clothe her and administer to her needs before Auntie Eve could rise ascendant and call us to be with her.”

“I still don’t see why Hannah has to be so mean.”

“She appears mean because she is lost to her own love. She is like your father. She has a condition. She cannot handle stress.”

“Naomi and Rachel are mean, too.”

“It is possible that Naomi is seeking to work a dark magic on Rachel and to taint the pure whiteness of her soul,” Momma says.

“What dark magic?”

“That is an unfolding we must continue to monitor,” Momma only says.

Momma. The way she can lift me up with her words but also defeat me.

But the next morning comes, and my father sits at the breakfast table as if nothing has happened the day before to make him get up. The arrival of Hannah brings no new storm. She is cheerful, as if her mood is regulated by some inner clock that takes her from darkness to sunlight.

Auntie Eve comes to us this morning from her ground-floor apartment, as gaunt as my mother is stout, her dress hanging on her meager frame. She comes like the wind, as Momma says, causing loose papers to fly in the air and hot coffee to turn cold.

“Maya, I have need of you,” Auntie Eve says, her eyes on Momma alone. A giant building has risen out of the earth and they must tend to it. The nature of real work should not be revealed to just anyone, Momma knows, as she excuses herself from the table. My father can talk about Red China, but in the next room is where the real business of our lives is being discussed. Momma allows the collaboration of urgency to commence in a language foreign to my father’s ear, a language that, in its musicality, rises far above any other on the earth in summoning images of domestic order.

If my father is to be made to get up about anything, surely it would be Auntie Eve arriving as a whirlwind to disturb our breakfast together. But if he is annoyed, he does not say. Auntie Eve may have a boss who makes her life very hard, but we have a boss too, and that boss is Auntie Eve. My father must now summon understanding of what he owes to both Momma and Auntie Eve for the shelter that the building provides and to acknowledge that primacy must be given to its well-being. My father knows how to cede vast territories to unconsciousness and survive in the role that has been assigned to him

and is not without physical resources during Momma's absence. In his corner of the dining room is his small bookcase full of the literature of eternal life. He puts on his thick reading glasses and reaches for a slender pamphlet from the great A. A. Allen and his ministry of faith. Month after month he receives these pamphlets, printed in red or blue ink, so he can have the fortification he needs for the life he leads.

The cars and trucks are everywhere, not just on Broadway. They zoom down the side streets as well, forcing you to stay on the sidewalk and to say "Please" before crossing. Momma says these are the rules of the world, and the consequences of disobedience are severe. A yellow Studebaker, built low to the ground and with a canvas top, comes for me when I dash into the street in a pandemonium burst of energy. Halfway under a parked car the Studebaker knocks me.

A simple truth is this: The cars of New York City show no mercy. They have patience on their side in waiting for the time when they can strike.

Some men carry me home and lay me in Momma's bed, and Momma comes to visit me when she can, as she has the building to attend to, and all the commotions it can manufacture. A book of fairy tales is given to me as my reward for living and a golden bell to keep me safe even when it is not ringing.

My youngest sister, Vera, shares the room with Luke and me. Momma has placed a little cot at a right angle to our bunk bed for my youngest sister. At bedtime she holds her leelah, a strip from an old blanket, to her nose.

I fart in Vera's face. I move my bowels, as Momma tells me, but in the bathtub where I am not alone, positioned as I am between Luke and Vera. I thrill to the shrieks my kaka summons in my brother and sister. I am full of the power of abandonment to my own urges. A surprise waits around every corner, and I am there to deliver it, unleashed upon the earth and going strong, like America itself. No one can stop me when I have the power of a juggernaut flowing.

Vera Severa. Sometimes I see her and sometimes I do not. "Daddy, Daddy, Gideon smacked me," she cries out, in our room, where we sit on the floor. Having heard the call for his artillery, my father responds, invading our room and making it his own, saying, as if only I can answer him, "Have I been made to get up? Have I been made to get up?" before smacking and smacking again, unleashing his annihilating power on my face.

Father, do you know what you have done? Do you see the betrayal profound that you have taken her side without prior questioning? Do you see the alliance you have made that will allow me no room to breathe? But my father sees none of what I have been shouting out to him in my mind. He sees only that his action was just. He has liquidated the enemy. He has given himself to Vera Severa for all time and given her face reason to adopt the malevolent smile of triumph that shall also, for all time, be with her.

I am the child of one nation, and one nation only. I *am* Momma's son. My father cannot be with me where I am going. He must be severed from me in this world, lest baggage supreme be tied to me whose weight and smell I simply cannot bear. Gone must be Armenia and all its primitive punishments, gone all the hairs on all those hairy bodies, gone all the torturing names with their ongoing consonants. I must be an American with

the makeup I am assuming. I must approximate the land of Sweden as it manifests in blond hair and tanned skin and the blue and *yellow* of its flag. Father, I am leaving you now. I commit you to your own devices. I cleave myself clean. Nothing attaches.

Nothing.

The school is Episcopal, Momma says, explaining that the word means it is not one thing or the other, neither Protestant nor Catholic, but something in between, and that you can tell the emptiness of a religion by the clerical adornments and rituals that it embraces. Momma says God is a lightning bolt upon her mind and body, and so no saints or finery is needed. Still, Momma, says, a misguided heart is not necessarily the same as a bad heart, but that in any case I am not to allow the black-robed nuns who run the school to take me away from Jesus.

Vera and I make it to the front steps of the school before racing back up the hill and into the building, where we find Momma, who has gone beyond us into her day and is speaking with a woman inquiring about a room. “What is this foolishness? You go back there right now,” Momma says, flashing iron where I had known only pillow softness.

The school stands across from the welfare hotel, where only Negroes seem to live. A bad smell comes from the hotel, and a sense of danger. The block is quiet except for this one stretch, as if we have been walking in sunlight and now are in a place of dark shadows, Negro men and women and children leaning out of windows with rotted sashes shouting down to others hanging out on the stoop in a riot of sound all through the day and the night.

Momma saying, "I have a job. Why don't they? I'm not afraid of a little dirt. Lazy bones living off the money the city gives them." Momma means the welfare checks that let the Negroes remain idle all through the day with their liquor and their noise and their violence.

The school is where I begin to learn my place in the order of things. Momma is patient with me that my grades are not good. "There are many ways to be a shining star," she says, seeking to ease my anger that my world is out of control because I have fallen behind. I cry that I should have to be stupid in the world because I cannot correctly answer the questions on the arithmetic test that Sister Mary Christabel had sprung or that my penmanship reveals the poor quality of my mind, the letters of my words lacking a consistency or flourish pleasing to the eye, or that, in the matter of art, I show myself a copycat, drawing the patterns of classmates on the stiff colored paper I have been given because I could not summon any patterns of my own.

It is not the world I want to live in, that I should be so low in my own estimation, but Momma says, "The lamentation of a child and all human beings has its basis in comparison; you must not succumb to such folly," seeking to give me buoyancy in the dark waters into which I have been plunged.

And yet, outside the school, I am at the very top, shimmying up a streetlamp and hanging by one hand from its arm high off the ground as Momma looks on in horror. A son in red high-top Keds and a polo shirt and jeans showing Momma what he can do.

At the school the boys enter the girls' cloakroom to smell Alison Pauley's coat, so longing are they to be near her blondness. And I am among those who cannot take their

eyes or minds off her. And yet it is not for me to show my interest in her though other boys, like Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy, do just that by making her their friend.

In the basement cafeteria, I hear Alison Pauley and Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy talking about a birthday party to which she has invited them. And then I hear them and others talking about the same party some days later, and the fun they have had. I have been established in the place I need to be outside their realm, and the pain is astonishing.

In truth, I have been to the homes of Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy. The apartments they live in are beyond my understanding, with modern furniture and complicated draperies and kitchens with spotless surfaces and dazzling appliances. I am left stricken by the comparisons Momma has warned me not to make.

And they have young fathers who work for corporations and wear expensive suits and walk with one hand in their front pocket in the way that men of power are supposed to walk. And, in turn, these fathers have taught their sons to walk with one hand in a front pocket so they can be proud to call them their sons. And their fathers do not come from Armenia but from America, and do not have names that are disorderly and strange and full of consecutive consonants. Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy do not have to say where they are from because their names say where they are from. They do not have to hear the titters on that first day of school when Sister Mary Christabel takes the roll call.

Nor do Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy have mothers who are old when they were born, as Momma had been old, because forty-three is old for a mother to be. And their mothers do not wear the man-shaped shoes that she wears or the rubber stockings she needs to ease the pain of her varicose veins.

“Momma, no,” I gasp, when Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy come to my front door. She does not see the smirks the sight of our living room brings to their faces: linoleum instead of carpeting, a sofa that is really a bed with a spread thrown over it and a couple of pillows placed against the wall, an old TV, and cluttered surfaces. I rush from dining room and the cardboard box where I have been trying to find a matching pair of socks and push them back out the door and say to her, “Momma, don’t ever ever do that again. Momma, do you know who they are and what they can *do*?” But Momma has a mind that goes where mine can’t go, a mind bound to a truth that leaves her protected from the laughter of Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy. Momma begins to sing: “And He walks with me and He talks with me...”

Momma doesn’t understand what Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy can do, how their tongues can shape and deliver the word “pigsty” that day and for the rest of the week, and soon that same word will be on the tongue of Alison Pauley and all those Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy have claimed for their own.

Or maybe Momma does understand, and I have no need to tell her what she already knows. “Oh, if I only had the time, we would have such a beautiful home,” she says, as if she is visioning that other life of order right then and there. Some song of wistful longing can rise sometimes from Momma, and when we hear it, we know once again that Momma is careworn with the burdens of this earth.

Though Alison Pauley has been claimed by Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy, my mind will not let go of the possibility that I can be with her, too. But for that to happen, I would have to be with her alone, beyond the confines of the classroom, where I am contained and reduced and not as I want to be. And so I wait for her across the street and

up the hill from the school, my heart beating wildly, as wildly as it ever has since, and I hear the voice in my mind saying, “Do you know what you are doing? Can you not just go home?” But I cannot go home, not with Alison Pauley in my mind the way she is, with that golden hair that represents the bounty of America. And now here Alison Pauley is, climbing the hill in her blue parka and blue jumper and white blouse and knee socks, but I cannot go to her and all the words I had thought I would speak I cannot speak because the very sight of her is like cold water in my face, awakening me to the reality of who she is and who I am, with certainty established as to why she is on one side of the street while I remain on the other. For this reason do I just have to let Alison Pauley walk on by.

But that defeat does not mean that my mind loses its focus on Alison Pauley, or that hope does not revive that I could have her more in my life than she is. The day comes that the girls are walking up the stairs single file from their cloakroom and I jump out from behind the door and kiss Alison Pauley right on the cheek. Some of the girls scream and others burst out laughing but Alison Pauley looks at me as if I have burned her with a match. And so I flee to some unused room where I can be away from the punishing stares. But even alone they are with me, saying I have taken something that was not mine to take.

Hours pass. I sit at the back of the classroom, where I lift the top of my desk and pretend to be busy organizing my books in the small space. but am really using the top of the desk to hide myself from the other kids. My stolen kiss has not brought me any closer to Alison Pauley. I can see that it has done the opposite. Now she is more claimed by Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy than ever.

Sister Mary Christabel silences the room with her entrance. After taking attendance, she says, "Gideon Garatdjian will now stand and tell the class why he kissed Alison Pauley." Her pale, severe, black-hooded face seems to quiver, and her eyes project a cold anger. By now, all the kids have turned in their desks to stare at me. Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy are smiling, enjoying the idea of me catching it from Sister Mary Christabel, but Alison Pauley maintains her injured look.

"I don't know," I say.

"Speak louder, so we can hear you," Sister Mary Christabel says.

"I don't know," I say again.

"That is not a satisfactory answer."

"Because I had to."

"Because you had to?"

"Because I don't know."

"Tell us the truth."

"But I don't know."

"You may sit down," Sister Mary Christabel says.

The school day comes to an end, and Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy are waiting for me outside.

"That was so crazy what you did," Johnny Lacy says.

"It sure was," Edward Macy adds.

"You're pretty crazy," Johnny Lacy says.

"You sure are," Edward Macy confirms.

Though one has red hair and the other black, and one is chubby and the other thin, they stand as one, and I feel outside of whatever connection they have made.

There is a building called the House of Order right across from my own. It rises no higher but shows a rebuking posture, with its cleaner face and window frames freshly painted to keep them from rotting. It has hedges along its margins and a recessed entranceway and uniformed doormen who stand inside a marble lobby with soft chairs set out in which you can sit and know all the peace that is to be found in this world. It is not a building with striving immigrants or the sad and lonely elderly but men and women with families and the hope of America in their bright faces.

Langley Farmer lives in the House of Order. He is skinny and blond, like me. Within minutes of seeing him with Luke, the two of us are streaking down the hill and into Riverside Park. Still, I cannot outrun the guilt I feel that Luke has been left behind, but if I have been wicked, then let me be wicked and bear the full consequences.

On Dead Man's Hill, in the park's lower drive, we roam with our broomstick M1 rifles. On our bellies, amid the small stone markers for the dead, we pick off Kraut snipers and lob grenades into pillboxes. Kazing. Kazing.

Langley Farmer's father is gone, electrocuted in the basement of their country home. His mother is a bone with faded blond hair and eyes that confess their terror. On the eleventh floor of the House of Order do they live, behind a heavy door that closes with authority on the stillness of the landing. In the kitchen is a sparkling white sink with its enamel intact. A curtain of yellow happiness hangs over the window, the sun kissing the white tabletop. In the entire apartment not a single cockroach. Even the closets have

the stamp of order, with linens and clothes neatly arranged. Langley Farmer's room has a single bed and a desk and an illuminated Rand McNally globe of the world. From his window, you can look down on Broadway and see the traffic island in the middle of Broadway full of trees and the garage across the street, with its Esso sign, and the old people's home on the opposite corner.

A third person, his mother's mother, lives in that apartment. A mouse-like creature, she sits her small body in a wing chair and watches. Though Momma has me keep my hair short, I have begun curling strands of it so a lock will hang down over my forehead. Langley Farmer's grandmother says, "Are you trying to be a girl? Is that what you're trying to be? Because you're not a girl and you never will be, even if that is what you want to be." The smile on her face seems at odds with the harsh words she has spoken. Only later do I understand that the smile goes with the harsh words and is meant to make them sharper. She couldn't have sliced me in the same way with the same words if she were frowning or her face flashed with anger. She is like my sister Naomi that way, smiling while she smacks.

"No," I say, smiling in the way that I can to show that I am not hurt, though I am hurt to the point of being destroyed, the way I can be when someone speaks to me as Langley Farmer's grandmother has.

"Then don't try to act like one," she says, with that same smile on her face.

As I sit in the living room with the TV on, an unmistakable smell causes me to look down. The sole of the Keds sneaker on my right foot is caked with dog shit. I have tracked it all over the carpet. Only when I see what I have done do Langley Farmer and his mother and grandmother see what I have done as well. I have no words to offer them.

In seeing the shit they are seeing me, seeing that all I can offer them is shit and more shit, the shit of everything I come from. I untie my shit-smearred sneaker and run out the door holding it and down the eleven flights of stairs and out past the uniformed doormen back to my side of the street and my family's building, like a rat disappearing into a hole.

Tall Tommy iss the building handyman. Momma can count on him to replace blown fuses or burst pipes or repair broken light fixtures. Tall Tommy can do just about anything. The room he lives in, 2C3, is big enough for his single bed and a chair and a fridge and a small stove.

“Look at him. He goes right for the meat. Doesn't pay any attention to the vegetables,” Tall Tommy says of me to my brother, after serving us some of his beef stew, as if he is noting something important that I will have to correct in future. For drinks, he mixes Seven-Up with Welch's grape juice.

“Maybe this will put a little hair on his balls,” Tall Tommy also says to Luke after handing me the drink, as if there is no need to speak to me directly. Or maybe it is his way of making his words more important, that I should have to hear myself spoken about instead of to. Tall Tommy's annoyance does not destroy me. And as for what Tall Tommy says the drink—a terrible fight between the grape juice and the soda that makes it sparkling and delicious—can do, the word “balls” is naked and horrifying, and in combination with the word “hair” makes me recoil. Once more, hairiness is what my father and all Armenians are afflicted with, and I have been born under the Swedish sun. I am Momma's Svenska pojka.

“I think there is something wrong with your brother. I think he is a little girl,” Tall Tommy also says that night. I have been sitting on his lap, and his warmth against my bottom makes me want to stay there forever. Luke laughs, the way he can, when Tall Tommy finds fault with me. Tall Tommy taking the time we had together that I was so much liking, and then saying what he does in the way that he does, sharing a secret he isn’t supposed to—that is cause for shame.

Tall Tommy’s black Labrador, Biff, leads the way into the night. Down the hill we go, past the welfare hotel, with its riot of sound, and the now dark school building, till we come to Riverside Drive, where we rest by the base of a statue of a Polish hero who helped America to be free. And though there are cars in violation of the stillness of the dark, their headlights so bright and the rapid revolutions of their tires so persisting, they cannot take away from the peace of what Riverside Drive is, with the roadway and the bank of orderly buildings and the iron fence and warm lights of the streetlamps and the traffic lights and all that people have made existing with the green grass and the trees in a way that doesn’t result in the sadness of violation. The smell of damp earth rises and Tall Tommy taps tobacco from a small canvas pouch into thin paper, which he then rolls tight and smokes, the smell of that lit cigarette adding to my delirium. It is only that I want, in that moment, to be there forever with Tall Tommy and my brother and Biff, romping through the fallen leaves of autumn.

North along the top drive of Riverside Park we walk on the bridle path beside a low retaining wall. Then, as if Tall Tommy has heard the call of the Hudson River farther west and the glittering lights on the New Jersey shore, the Spry sign glowing a devil’s red, we take the curving stairs down into the lower level of the park, past Dead Man’s

Hill, where Langley Farmer and I left so many Germans dead and dying. Only now, without the safety of daylight, I am aware of the danger that loud talk and careless movement can bring, because this is New York City, where things happen on every corner, the cold steel of a thrusting blade and all the rest. I know these things in my bones, as if I have been murdered once and wouldn't like for it to come again. So now it is I, though young in my years, who is with the children, Tall Tommy and Luke not grasping what violence can await.

We come to open flatland, the frenzied cars racing along the West Side Highway with a violence all their own, reassuring me that any murder that might occur would now have to do so in the motorists' eye. Tall Tommy, ungoverned by such fears, shines a flashlight on a spring where he says the water is pure and has us cup our hands to drink from it. He shows us grass that is not grass but wild scallions, with the onion-like smell abundant when he pulls the shoots from the soil and holds them to our noses. He has us gather fallen limbs and twigs for kindling so we can make a roaring fire on which to roast marshmallows, all charred on the outside and gooey inside, and eat them off our sharpened sticks.

Tall Tommy has brought us into a world that connects to other worlds: cars pulled north by the magnetic attraction of the George Washington Bridge, shining silver in the night, and beyond the bridge to the country that awaits, where now Rachel is; and the river traffic heads that way as well, away from the salt water deep of the Atlantic Ocean. And there is the Chevrolet advertisement mounted on a billboard over the meatpacking plant on One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street, causing an indescribable fever of longing.

“I want to show you boys something, so you will know the fake from the real McCoy. Are you ready?” Tall Tommy asks, the fire now dwindled to embers.

“Ready for what?” I ask, but Tall Tommy has already begun to walk away with Biff now back on the leash across the exit road from the highway. On the other side he swings his legs over a railing and disappears down an embankment. From below he shines the flashlight so we can find our way through the thick brush. At the bottom of the embankment we pass through an opening in the wire fence and now stand on level ground where a roadbed of rock ballast and three sets of tracks have been laid. Across from them are the highway and the river.

“Should we be here?” Luke asks, and I am thinking the same, but Tall Tommy just sits on a rail and pulls out his harmonica and plays “Home on the Range.” I know the words, and they and the tune made it the slowest, saddest song I have ever heard. Then Tall Tommy produces from another pocket a green pint bottle, the kind that my brother-in-law Chuck carries around, and swigs from it.

“That’s good, fellas, that’s real good. Makes the night into day.”

“How does it do that?” I ask.

“Someday you’ll find out,” Tall Tommy says.

“Momma says—”

“Momma says what?” Tall Tommy says.

“Nothing,” I say.

Tall Tommy has a gleam in his eyes that hadn’t been there before. “You’re a momma’s boy. That’s why you like to sit on my lap. But that’s all right. Someday I’ll

teach you what a man needs to know. I'll be going back to my avocado farm in California. And I'll send for you boys so you can grow up real good."

"When will that be?" Luke asks.

"Well, you both need to be patient. I'm going to tell you something, but only if you promise to keep it secret."

"Sure. We'll keep it secret," Luke says.

"Boys, the government has me here on a top-secret mission. As soon as I can wrap it up, I'll be heading back west."

There is a tunnel just a short ways south of us into which the tracks disappear. I have seen that tunnel before. You can look down into it through the grates set into the meadow on the lower level of the park. The smell of diesel smoke rises through those grates when the trains rumble past. The tunnel continues down to Seventy-Second Street, where there is a sprawling freight yard.

The sound of a train whistle turns us toward the tunnel's mouth. There, in the distance, we can see the light coming closer, its beam spreading outward onto the tunnel's walls.

The whistle sounds again, and then a third time, as the train bears down. Luke and I step back but Tall Tommy raises up only slowly off the rail. By now Biff is tugging frantically on the leash and barking. Tall Tommy gives way only an inch while holding tight to Biff, as if he doesn't want the train to think he is afraid, while the boxcars of America roll and rollick past: the Wabash; Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe; Erie Lackawanna; Bangor and Maine; the Rock Island Line; Southern Pacific; Illinois Central, the Seaboard Line, and all the rest, displaying the might of America in a jaunty

procession like nothing I have ever seen, and finally the vanishing red lights of the caboose as the train continues toward the George Washington Bridge and beyond.

Grabbing us by our shirts, and thrusting his pale face close, Tall Tommy says, “Now do you understand, boys? Now do you?”

While lying in bed that night, I hear the driver of the *New York Times* truck shout “Yo” and then a bale of wire-bound papers thud to the pavement in front of the luncheonette. I think of the life on the street, and how I am away from it for now, and of Tall Tommy’s avocado farm in California, and what a wonderful thing that would be to live on such a farm, particularly in California, the word itself summoning some new sweet pain of longing, as if it really is a land of the golden sun, with a light achingly beautiful and peculiar to that place alone, and that maybe it is even a kind of heaven from which I had come and to which I can return. And I think about me wanting to be a girl, according to Tall Tommy, and the sadness I felt for him when he said he was on a secret mission, because I knew he was not. I saw how his face changed when he said those words, how he looked scared and even ashamed, like he knew he was lying but couldn’t help himself and was asking me to take pity on him and care for him and not let him know that I knew it was a lie. It was like he was showing me his sickness and saying, Please don’t hurt me because of it. But mostly I think of that New York Central twin-engine diesel, with right-angled lines of white war paint on its high cheekbones, and that heartbreaking red decal front and center, and the power sound of the train’s rumbling resolve, saying, I am here, from the tunnel I have come in all my overwhelming strength that makes a mockery of everything your mind could ever think.

Alcibiades Ghent too has a room on the second floor, though in a different compartment than where Tall Tommy lives. Alcibiades is mine alone. I go to his room without Luke. Alcibiades lets me sit on his bed in the afternoon watching Hopalong Cassidy in his black outfit ride his horse, Topper, and sling the lead.

Alcibiades says he has a beautiful two-wheeler bicycle with a red frame and thick tires stored in the basement. He says he will make a gift of the bicycle to me and that I will be seen as a young prince throughout the neighborhood when I ride it.

Alcibiades does not watch *Hopalong Cassidy* with me on his black and white TV. He is busy throwing darts at the target board on the wall. The darts have long needle-like points and a heavy metal barrel and plastic tail fins. Alcibiades stands with his legs slightly spread and throws them with a short, compact motion.

When a week and then two pass and I have not yet received the bicycle, I ask Alcibiades when it will be mine.

Alcibiades kneels so his eyes can be level with mine and takes firm hold of both my arms. His eyes are like two big black pools in his face. It is like looking into the eyes of a giant insect.

“Do you know what the name *Alcibiades* means?”

“No,” I say.

“Alcibiades means *truth*. That’s what it means. So when I say something to you, it will always be true. Always. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I say, though I don’t.

“The bicycle can only come when you have been good enough for it to come, as only a very good boy should have the privilege of riding such a bicycle.”

“Good enough?” I say, fearful now that the bicycle might never be mine.

Alcibiades goes back to his darts. “Roberts comes set, he goes into his windup, he delivers...Roberts brushes the batter back off the plate with a high, hard one...Roberts is painting the black...Roberts is demonstrating his pitching artistry...” In this way does Alcibiades now speak, not telling me who Roberts is.

“Are you ready for the Major Leagues?” Alcibiades continues. He comes between me and the television set. “Well, are you?” Anger is now written large on his face, leaving me to understand that I am in the center of his mind and not on the sidelines of his strange activity. “This is America, Bub. A man has to earn what he gets. Otherwise he doesn’t appreciate it. So are you ready to earn that beautiful red bicycle?”

Alcibiades pulls me from the chair and positions me to the side of the dart board and has me take a batting stance. “Hands high and your weight on your back leg, so you can spring into the pitch the way you wicked batters always try to do. Because you’re out to drive the ball over the fence, to take away my bread and butter. You see, there you go, trying to crowd the plate and get an edge.”

When he goes into his windup I close my eyes. The dart is silent in the air and sinks into the cork.

“Strike one,” Alcibiades says.

Then it is ball one and ball two and then strike two and then there is a loud knocking at the door. Alcibiades puts his index finger to his lips, should I have any thought of calling out. But then a key enters the lock and the lock turns and the door opens and there is Momma with folded sheets and pillowcases and a towel over her arm. There isn’t a lock in the building Momma doesn’t have a key for so she can distribute

fresh linens to the tenants each week. “My goodness, are you here, Mr. Ghent? And my Lord, is that you, Gideon?” Because Momma is on full alert that goodness might not be prevailing, she does not wait for Alcibiades to explain. “What is the meaning of this? Run along now, Gideon,” she says, keeping her eyes fixed on Alcibiades.

That night Momma comes to me. “I do not want you in that man’s room,” Momma says to me.

“Yes, Momma,” I say.

“I do not have a good feeling about that man,” Momma says. “Are you listening to me or do my words mean nothing?”

“I’m listening, Momma.”

“Has he made any trouble for you, my son?”

“What trouble?”

“Has he been normal with you, my son?”

“He has me stand next to the dart board while he throws darts,” I say.

“He does what?”

“He says this is America, Bub. A man has to earn what he gets.”

“What is this foolishness you are speaking now?”

“He says I have to do what he wants if I am to have his red bicycle.”

“Bicycle?” Momma says.

“The bicycle he has stored in the basement, Momma.”

“I see,” Momma said, but nothing more.

Momma swings into action, disposing of Alcibiades Ghent to a place where I can see him no more. Another man now occupies the room. **Luigi Santibelli** is here to assist Auntie Eve with her enterprise. He has come from Sicily with white hairs on his brown chest and has set up a shop in the basement where he can reupholster the padded chairs of Auntie Eve and make all her furniture shine with the varnishes and shellacs and polishes he applies. The joy that explodes from Luigi's face is not unending. There are whispers that he has split a policeman's skull.

Luigi Santibelli does not throw darts or come set before going into his delivery or say "bub." Instead, Luigi says to Luke and me, "Oh what no good sumbitches you a gonna be" and to me only he says, "How is your little dickie?" laughing with the tears spilling from his eyes, and "How is your auntie, the old pussy." And though sometimes his breath smells like kaka and the word *dickie* hits me so I am paralyzed and he jabs at my private place and it is not for him to be speaking of Auntie Eve in such a way, as if she were no more than her private part, nothing can long get in the way of the love that I am feeling. Because those words he speaks have no bearing on his light.

Sometimes, like now, Luigi's face is bound with the purpose his work has given him. He is bringing a table back to life, sanding where the surface is troubled. Later he will heal the wounded spot with potions that smell so good.

Once, back in Sicily, Luigi was up in the branches of a tree, where he had taken refuge from the wolves down below that had gathered to feast on him. He had a rifle, but only a small supply of ammunition, and so he would have to take careful aim. Bang. With a single shot a wolf fell dead. And then, bang, and another wolf fell dead, shot between

its yellow eyes. And when two more fell dead, such was Luigi's Gideonsman eye, the wolves slinked off, cowed and defeated.

The thought was worrisome that the wolves would wait so patiently to have their bad breath mouths on Luigi. Worse was to imagine what could have happened if Luigi hadn't had a rifle, or if the rifle jammed, or if he had shot and missed the wolves, or if the wolves had had more staying power—if night had come and Luigi were still in the tree and now more wolves had arrived. How would he keep from falling asleep and out of the tree? And what if the wind and the rain and hunger came and there the wolves still were? No, no, this was a world to watch out for where wolves could have such a fixed intent.

Beyond the small basement shop is a territory I forbid myself to go, a valley of piled-high chairs and tables, a chaos of unsettling clutter.

Luigi reaches into the pockets of his baggy pants for dollar bills and sends me to the meat store for sausages, which he splits with a pocket knife and places flat on the small grill. Nothing is as good as a Luigi sausage on a roll with mustard, nothing on this earth.

"Letta go," Luigi says.

Momma is happy that a Coney Island outing is in store for us with Luigi. But Vera cannot come with us. Momma doesn't have to tell us why. It is because Luigi says things like "little dickie" and "old pussy" and lets his hands go where they do not belong.

Harry Frug's radio and TV store stands on the corner and there is Mr. Debray's hosiery store right next door. Harry Frug has the face of a bulldog and Mr. Debray has the face of a man from France. He removes delicate stockings from the tissues of thin boxes

for the women of the Upper West Side and holds them up for their inspection. The softly insistent words he speaks sound like silver, the color of his hair. The Drago shoe store one door down smells of leather and polish. Inside Mr. Delfonico takes nails from his mouth and drives them with a hammer into the heel of a shoe on the last. Mr. Delfonico is back after being away for a week when a Negro woman from down the block struck him in the eye with the heel of her shoe for telling her it was too broken to fix. And there is the luncheonette, where the men of the building gather at night for their newspapers, and Ralston's Clothiers, where the Columbia University students come for their Ivy League clothes; and the bakery, where Luke and I can go for free ends of bread from the slicer. What a rackety vibration the slicer makes, and what work it does with rye and pumpernickel and whole wheat, too, making even slices for the world to see. And we come to the Robin Dell restaurant, where each table has a tomato-shaped dispenser with which to splatter the hamburgers that taste so good with ketchup that makes them even better. Toward the south end of the block are the meat store and the produce store and the tiny jewelry shop; and the Bon Ton dry cleaners on the corner. All these stores are there, and all of them have meaning to my life for the order they provide.

And on One Hundred and Twelfth Street and One Hundred Eleventh Street are there stores as well: the Royal King dry cleaners, in direct competition with the cleaners just across the street; and the Happy Garden Chinese restaurant; and Riverside Hardware, where Auntie Eve has an account; and in that same building the Puerto Rican barbers, where Momma sends Luke and me, so we can look American with our hair cut short; and on the far corner, the Chase Manhattan Bank, where Auntie Eve and Momma deposit the building's money.

Over a bridge does the train slowly rumble, and as I look down I am afraid in a way that does not allow me to speak. The bridge will buckle and the train, with its heavy weight, will plunge and we will drown. No one should place his faith in the certainty of steel, not when it takes you so high up and the ocean is waiting. New Utrecht Avenue, Stillwell Avenue—Brooklyn has burst the bounds of comprehension and order. What can Twenty-Fifth Avenue possibly mean when in Manhattan there is only a Fifth Avenue and nothing higher than a Twelfth Avenue and what is that to join a name to a number and call it Bay Fiftieth Street?

On the ramp down to street level tattooed vendors hawk white sailor caps, but the salty smell of the ocean pulls us Across Surf Avenue. Soon we are under the boardwalk on cool rippled sand, dappled light filtering down through the slats, before encountering the brutality of the hotter and unshielded sands beyond. Children are batting beach balls the many colors of Joseph's coat into the air. Under beach umbrellas with poles sunk in the sand old men with breasts and sagging flesh lounge in folding chairs. And there in the distance mere specks in the shimmering air become, as they draw closer, boys with black boxes strapped to their backs containing their ice cream cargo kept cool by dry ice.

The sun casts my shadow on the sand, so distressingly thin in comparison with Luke's. Boys with strong, dark bodies whip past, hair plastered to their well-shaped heads and their bathing trunks clinging after a dip in the ocean. I am not like them, I think,, staring at the wet footprints they have left behind. My knees are knobby; my flesh is tired, like that of old people.

Luigi is made for the beach. His round body soaks in the sun. Luke and he go where I cannot, far out beyond the breakers. The lifeguard stands in his tower and blows

his whistle. At the water's edge I stand, the surf coming and going, leaving my feet deep in the wet sand.

Now the lifeguard is down from his perch and at the water's edge, blowing his whistle again and again and motioning with his arms, directing his blast not at the throngs in water to their waists but at Luigi and Luke, who have gone beyond where safety is to be found. How sleekly powerful the lifeguard's body. How perfect his shadow.

It is not Luigi's way to be reined in. "Whassa matter that you a blow the whistle like that? Why you do that? Why?" he says, pulling up and retying his brown trunks as he comes dripping from the surf.

"It's a safety regulation," the boy says.

"No tella me about safety. I coma to the beacha to swim," Luigi says.

"But that's my job."

"My life not a your job. Your life is a your a job. Capisce?" Now is Luigi gesturing, his right forearm up and his right hand moving back and forth. And now is a scowl on his face that darkens it and places him beyond any use for words.

A crowd has gathered, drawn by the fuss, but disperses when the lifeguard, sensing danger, returns to his station.

Luke and I take a short walk. "He gets really angry. I was scared he was going to hit the lifeguard," I say.

"Don't be so scared," Luke says, staring out at the horizon.

"Letta go, you no good sumbitches," Luigi says, when we return. He is back in the sun where no dark shadow can find him. Hot dogs and French fries in paper cones, sprinkled with salt and doused with ketchup, await us on the boardwalk, and cotton candy

like a woman's teased hair, and candied apples. The rides are endless that Luigi pays for, the terror of the Tornado and the Cyclone as the cogwheel pulls our string of cars to the top before the plunge that causes our stomachs to drop and then bracing ourselves as the cars tear around the curves. Surely there will come a time when the track doesn't hold or a beam falls across our path. We ride the Whip and go-carts and bumper cars. When there is congestion, tall young men with open shirts jump aboard and guide us free.

And then to Forty-Second Street we go, only now it is evening, and Luke and I wear sailor hats Luigi has bought for us. We are now part of the slow-moving throng under movie marquees, one after another, billowing out over the sidewalk for the entire block, the cool air a balm for our burnt skin. My eyes go, as if magnetized, to the stilettos in the store windows and mannequins of women in black and red and purple undergarments. And above it all a stream of news on the neon message board banding the New York Times Building. Such worldliness as the world had never seen, I can hear Momma say.

Whassa matta? You a sick? Why you no a eat?" Luigi says. "You a all skin and a bones."

Luigi has dragged me to the shame place with his disapproval, and redness far redder than the sun has turned my skin comes into my face. Luigi has seen what I saw in my shadow on the sand, that enough hasn't been given to me to show myself in this world.

That night, even the touch of a sheet is too much for our burning skin, but Momma comes and coats our bodies with calamine lotion. "There is one sun for the world, my sons, but another for the children of hell. One burns hot and the other hotter."

So Momma says, leaving us to contemplate our iniquities, and the wrath to come.

It is Sunday. The smell of lamb roasting in the oven is everywhere. Even with my door closed, I can sense my father is home. “The world has failed your father to the point that he has no desire to reap its sinful harvest. This is a place that all of us must come to,” Momma says. My father sits in his corner in the dining room reading *Abundant Life*, a magazine by the faith healer Oral Roberts, from Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Out on Broadway, Frenchie is lassoing fire hydrants with a long, thick rope while riding his bike without hands. He is Frenchie because he speaks with a French accent. He is twice our size and strong. Then the thick rope comes down over me and he pulls it tight around my chest.

“Where you go?” Frenchie says, having dismounted from his bike.

“We’re going to church,” I say.

“You know what I do to some kid the other day?”

“No,” I say.

“I pop out his eye with my thumb. I don’t do that to you because you and your brother are my friends.”

He brings his face close to mine. He is like a dog, sniffing me as well as seeing me. He has these thick lips and sad eyes and brown skin.

“Did he really do that?” Vera asks, after Frenchie removes the rope and rides off.

“Maybe. He’s pretty scary,” Luke says.

I wear my white sailor suit and Luke his navy blue. Vera is in a white dress.

“It’s the store that smells good,” Vera says, of the Jewish deli on One Hundred Eleventh Street. The vent blows out warm air smelling of corned beef and pastrami. On the next block we stop at the toy store, where we buy comic books and candy. Behind the counter stands Mr. Dolphus. He has a pockmarked face and stared down at us from a great height.

We ride the express train to Thirty-Fourth Street, and downstairs enter the arcade of Pennsylvania Station. At the east end is a florist’s shop, with rhododendron leaves such as are set out in our lobby by Auntie Eve, and flowers of all colors. And a concession stand draws us with the smell of roasted nuts and red and caramel-colored candied Macintosh apples and freshly squeezed orange juice. Behind the row of ticket windows for the Long Island Railroad is a bathroom without doors that features an electric drier, while beyond the arcade exists something very different, a vast concourse with marble columns and wrought iron grillwork and giant windows through which light pours as if from Heaven itself. And through gates can you go to the real railroad of America, the Pennsylvania Railroad, its burgundy-colored and pinstriped trains with the overhead electrical connectors pulling sleek coach cars of the same colors that you want to live and die in.

Some world exists here, with trains beckoning to worlds beyond, that our world cannot be a part of, not on this day, not where we are headed.

A Nedicks serves up franks on a toasted bun with sweet pickle relish and an orange drink with a sharper, more synthetic taste than pure orange juice could ever have. Lobsters are still alive in the dark waters of the tank in the deli window next door, and in the window of the closed Doubleday bookstore hardcover books with jackets are on

display. Another hot dog stand, the Royster, stands lonelier and more subdued than Nedicks, while across from it is a long, narrow restaurant and bar. The lower panel of the window is of ribbed, opaque glass, as if you are not meant to see the drinkers inside. And before we can even come to it is an alcove with an escalator mounting to the Greyhound Bus Station.

At the other end, the life in the arcade begins to wane. Seed packets in cardboard boxes are on display outside another florist shop, and a wide and dreary staircase leads up to the IND Eighth Avenue trains, a foreign line we never ride. Bearing right, we take a downward path that shows no sign of commerce or people but only howling desolation without end. Everything is the loneliness of steel beams and tiled walls and iron fencing in this forlorn stretch of the station that only the reckless, in a sad and wanton flight from life, would seek to explore. Now does the silence penetrate our bones that we are walking where no one else is, first straight ahead and then to our left, the expanse of the arcade and the bounty of life behind us in this shrunken, secluded space.

A long set of steep steps take us to the exit, and I hear within me weeping and crippling concern that later Momma will be making that same ascent, all on her own, so she can be present for the afternoon service at the tabernacle. I see her with her slow gait mounting higher and higher only to lose her footing and fall backward, down and down. Do you know the consequence for a skull when it impacts with a concrete step? Do you know what it would mean to hear that skull crack, and that this is your mother lying in agony in her own blood? Would you not want to stay right where you are, taking not another step forward until the danger has passed? Would you too not heed the call of concern for your mother's safety?

Between Eighth and Ninth Avenue exists a street with a sadness all its own, and it starts with the Horn and Hardart Automat. There, under the metal awning of the automat's loading bay, sits a cowering Negro man making a mournful sound. Standing over him are two police officers. The smell of urine is strong enough for us to hold our noses.

"Please, Mr. Po-licemen, don't be taking me into that parking lot. Please don't be taking me back there." The Negro man is sobbing. The tears run down his black face. It is not clear what the Negro man is afraid of. These are officers of the law. They are not here to do harm. But then one of them bangs his leaded billy club against the corrugated grate and his voice snarls with iron authority as he says, "Let's go, champ. And if you don't go, then we'll make you go."

The other officer sees us looking on, and says, also with iron in his voice, "What are you kids looking at? You think this is some kind of movie? Get moving."

In the middle of the long block, and high above it, the giant electric cross suspended by brackets from the church wall beckons those to the east and the west to contemplate what Momma calls the emblem of suffering and pain and come and get right with the Lord Jesus before he comes again. Occupying the entire other side of the block is the gray granite mass of the General Post Office, and even now, on the Sabbath, are postal trucks entering and leaving the giant loading bays. And if we turn and look back, what do we see but another structure of strength, the Pennsylvania Railroad Station, with its columns rising over Eighth Avenue and one after another of the yellow cabs of New York City emerging from its carriage way into the flow of traffic.

But what we really saw, as we walked away, was the parking lot next to the automat where the police officers dragged the crying Negro, and then we didn't see it anymore, we just felt it, as we headed past the row of small rooming houses with vines growing on their plain facades and into the church.

The church has creaky floors and wainscoted walls and ammonia cakes in the bathroom urinals strong enough to snap me briefly out of my afternoon drowsiness. In the passageway to the large room on the ground floor, where our Sunday school classes are held, wall racks hold small white and manila envelopes in which we can make a contribution to the missionaries of the world. Those missionaries are in Africa and Asia and many other places, spreading the message of the Christ Jesus's love and being, as Momma says, fishers of men. The church has doors I have never been through. From one of them comes Sister Henry, so much in the image of my mother that I have to look twice to be sure it isn't her.

Sister Henry gathers our group at the back of the room: Stinky Maldonado and Eddie Goyco and Reuben Alvado and Willie Peterson and Peanuts Kozinski and Kenny and Johnny Jones, who say they are brothers though one is blond and the other is half Chinese. Lieutenant Martin Delmonico teaches Luke's class in a smaller room. Now and then Lieutenant Delmonico has to run out of the church and down the street to defend the law, his hand on the holstered gun he wears with his suits at all times.

Momma has given each of us a leather-bound pocket version of the King James Bible. The paper is gold-edged and fine, and the print is small. Sister Henry has us turn in our Bibles to the Book of Daniel, from which we take turns reading. But nothing in the reading about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, nor Daniel's gift of prophecy that he

hopes will save him from the wrath of King Nebuchadnezzar can keep my attention on the words and what they are signifying. Soon I am fast asleep on the bench, overcome by Momma's lunch and the big, fat salty pretzel I had bought and eaten in Pennsylvania Station. When I awake, Kenny and Johnny Jones are chanting the books of the Bible. They fly through Habakkuk and Haggai and Malachi and First and Second Thessalonians, and when they have gone through them all, from Genesis to the Book of Revelation, they then do the same thing back to front, causing Sister Henry to exclaim that they are indeed sunbeams for Jesus.

After Sunday school, Luke and Vera and I walk west to Ninth Avenue. On the way we pass a building beyond understanding. It shows a face of clean brickwork and the metal guards on the windows say serious work of a business nature is done there by hard and industrious people, possibly those with slide rules and mathematical minds. The deep-set loading bay, empty now of trucks, cries out its forlorn status, reeking of some time gone by of which I may not have been a part but should have been.

We cross over Ninth Avenue and come to a high wall, which Luke and I climb up on to stare far down at the sprawling grid of tracks on which the trains come and go from Pennsylvania Station, and the overhead wires that power those trains. And then we lift Vera up, so she too can see what power really is, before heading up to the Whelan's Drugstore on Thirty-fourth and Ninth.

Dolly is working the counter in a white uniform that can barely contain her and with a smile she cannot suppress. The ice cream sundaes she creates rise above their glass containers: three scoops of vanilla ice cream, a river of Hershey's chocolate syrup, sprinkles and nuts, and a maraschino cherry to make her work complete. I did not tell

Dolly all that was happening in my mind: that she might have to die and die because of the glaze of makeup upon her happy face and her other worldly ways outside the tabernacle. I am just happy for the light she shines and the ice cream sundaes she delivers.

High up on a shelf, out of easy reach, are suitcases for those in need of travel. They are Whelan's suitcases, at prices people can afford. In the racks are paperback books and greeting cards shout from the aisles and Whitman's samplers are loudly prominent on the shelves. Whelan's is a store that stands upon the earth in many places, and the tabernacle cannot contain it.

There, in the distance, is Momma coming toward us as we return to the tabernacle. All alone she walks in the sunlight, free from the shadow of the building that burdens her. She wears her brown dress with the white polka dots and rubber stockings to give her legs support and her man's shoes to give her the comfort that she needs. And Momma hasn't fallen down and down those many steps from the subway. No, no, no. Momma has walked up and up and up. And now she is walking slowly and within herself, as if the spaces outside—the post office and the small rooming houses—are things of the world she needn't bother herself about on this, the Sabbath.

“Momma, do you know what we saw down by the automat?” I say.

“What are you talking about, my son?”

“Some cops dragged a Negro bum into the parking lot,” Luke says.

“We saw them do it,” Vera says.

“Let us take everything to the Lord. Everything. Come now,” Momma says, ushering us into the tabernacle.

Hanging from the balcony, where we sit, are the flags of many countries—the tricolor of France and the red and white and green of Italy and the Union Jack of Great Britain. And Momma has seen to it that the blue and yellow flag of Sweden is displayed, but no one has hung the flag of Armenia, if ever there was one, which could only be the blackest black.

On the platform where Pastor Cohn stands is he looking down on those in the pews below, but from the side balcony where we sit is Momma looking down at him. Momma doesn't say of Pastor Cohn that he looks or sounds magnificent in the Lord, though it is clear he thinks so, arrayed in his dark blue suit and red tie and with his head of salt-and-pepper hair, the words of his ministry gathering within him as he stands in his black leather shoes that shine with the very best and on his face the satisfaction with what he is about to say before he has even said it, for so much in the words he speaks does he live, as if he would become the words themselves.

(Momma says Pastor Cohn is a Christian Jew and that if at one time he was on one track, he is now on another, and that if the Jews killed Jesus, there are some who didn't, and even if they did, they can *atone* for their act.)

Pastor Cohn doesn't start with thunder but with murmured words that rise slowly, as if his mind were first set to musing. "Brethren, I am crying in the Lord. Crying. I am crying in the Lord. Do you all know what it means to be crying in the Lord? Have you all, in your loneliness, your sickness, your bereavement, been crying in the Lord? Did not Jonah cry in the Lord? And Job, with his boils, did he too not cry in the Lord? Oh, my brothers and sisters, to be lost at the feet of the Lord's wisdom and then to be found in that very same place. Oh, my brothers. Oh, my sisters. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

Jesus. Like salt water taffy does he pull the first syllable before he sling-shots the fat wad of the second.

“Hush,” Momma says, her face full of concentration, when we squirm in our seats. “Hush now.”

Pastor Cohn’s mother sits on her throne of might behind her son. Her shoes and stockings are white. Her dress is white. Her skin and hair are white. She looks strange, like a symbol more than a person, as if she is saying that purity itself has come to the earth and that she will be watchful and mean toward any speck of dirt that approaches.

Behind Sister Cohn is the baptismal font where the children who are willing to have the Christ Jesus are lowered by Pastor Cohn into the holy water. And behind the font is a mural of the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus has to find some calm before the Roman soldiers come to take him from this earth.

There are hymns to be sung. “There Will be Showers of Blessings” and “In the Garden,” Momma’s favorite, and “Bringing in the Sheaves,” and all the hymns that testify to the goodness of the Lord. If we lean over the balcony, we can see Nino, with his head of black hair and his teeth as white as the ivory keys of the grand piano he plays. Nino’s teeth so very big in his mouth that sometimes they are all you can see.

Nino has won a scholarship to the Juilliard School of Music. The world has chosen him. Some commotion starts in my mind at the thought of Nino going forth into his new life, some happiness, as for Rachel, but also some tormented wondering as to how he can go out to the worldly Juilliard world without it being called a Judas Iscariot betrayal of the world he has here.

The words of Pastor Cohn now going up, going down, his words flying all around. Pastor Cohn preaching with *conviction*.

And then an explosion in the congregation below. Lorraine Hansen has caught fire and is now standing in her pew shouting words the world has never heard, her voice loud not with lamentation but with a tear-summoning ecstasy, her body trembling in accord with all that she is feeling. And there, above her at some lordly height, is poor Pastor Cohn stalled at the pulpit, his own word momentum checked by Lorraine Hansen's eruption so he can only look on with the rest of us as a silent witness. It is not a small thing for the passion-wracked Lorraine Hansen to interrupt the sound of Pastor Cohn, not when he has waited the whole week to crack the silence eternally dead with the words that he would summon.

And not five minutes after Lorraine Hansen has settled back into her seat, softly weeping, and Pastor Hansen has once more fired up his verbal express, Momma suddenly pops up, worlds retiring to their very own borders if they know what is good for them. *Oh sha la back te da sam litch anon anap teeda ona kan chilenko rampinza*. Momma's sound spreads through the tabernacle, like a long freight rumbling past a crossing, and Pastor Cohn can do nothing more than fret and frown at this new obstruction to his word flow. But Momma is not caring about Pastor Cohn. Momma has gone away to where she can be strong and abide now in her own poewr. Momma, come back, Momma, come back to me now. Come back with the attention that you must show. This I say within the confines of my own mind, sensing Momma must not be interfered with when she has gone away in this way. And Luke and Vera hold their silence, too. The Lord has her and she has the Lord and there is no room for Luke or Vera or me in the interaction that is

going on. We have been here before with her tears and her vocalizing and the herky-jerky motions of her visited body. We have seen it come and go, and yet now, as if it never has happened before, I am afraid it will not come and go but that the Holy Ghost in her will be like a fever that will never run its course.

But the fever does break and Momma does come back, the vessel of her being filled. Not that you would know her state of ecstasy at first, seeing her weepy and spent, like Lorraine Hansen before her—no good for listening, no good for anything but sitting with herself in the aftermath of the Lord.

Now the words of Pastor Cohn come and go faster and faster, the ceaseless expression like giant waves crashing down over me and then receding like the tide, taking their meaning with it.

Drowsy again, I slide onto the floor and curl up under the pew on the scratchy carpet liner. But it isn't long before another voice is heard. "Liar. Cheat. Fornicator. You who lie down with the whores on Eighth Avenue and who drink whiskey and smoke cigars in the saloons on Eighth Avenue. He's a hypocrite, ladies and gentleman. A hypocrite." A man is standing in the balcony opposite ours and pointing an accusing finger down at Pastor Cohn.

"Ushtah," Momma says, a word she reserves for nose-picking and other habits she finds disgusting.

Two church officers in suits and ties are now moving toward Pastor Cohn's tormentor. They approach not with wrath but in sorrow, not understanding that they are in the danger zone. The man, tall and strong, can stab them in their faces or throw them from the balcony, overcoming their combined strength with his hysteria. But he doesn't

even struggle when they each take an arm and lead him away. And soon Pastor Cohn is flying once again, slapping his open Bible and brandishing it in his right hand, saying, “The word has come. Jesus. Jesus is the word. Let there be no backsliding among us, my brothers and sisters, lest the fiery pit be our final destination,” all his words once more set out on their path of disappearance.

The sky is the gray of the post office across the street when we come out, but though the sun has gone away, Momma has the warmth of her own sun. “Let us go for some normal food,” she says, leading us to the Automat on the corner where her kindness can be manifest. The lady at the booth takes the bills Momma has given us and exchanges them for nickels that pour from a metal dispenser into a marble tray. In slots next to the small window compartments we deposit those nickels. Soon I have baked macaroni with a golden crust in a green oval dish and baked beans with bits of bacon in a small brown pot and yes, cherry pie, with the cherries so tart, and iced tea in which the sugar settles to the bottom no matter how much you stir. Oh, it is something to be with Momma, who gives and gives without stopping, at those brown tables with the revolving condiment trays—oil and vinegar and jars of mustard.

When we finish with the normal food that the Horn and Hardart Automat has to offer, we step into the dark and go down, down into Pennsylvania Station. And no, Momma doesn’t fall because I won’t let her, walking in front of her, always one step ahead, as a barrier from all harm and through the arcade to the Seventh Avenue subway that will take us home, and as we walk my hand is now in Momma’s white-gloved hand and nothing more needs to be said about the safety that it provides.

When we say to Momma, “Where is Auntie Eve that she is not at our tabernacle? And where is Father, that he is not here as well?” Momma says, “You must listen so my words mean more than the winds that come and go. The tabernacle has not done right by your aunt. Your aunt has the greatness of America itself, but the tabernacle has vilified and then crucified her on the cross of its own willful misunderstanding.”

“Why did they do that?” Luke says.

“Because your aunt had a vision of what life could be. Truth has an eternal nature, and when your aunt saw the godless of Manhattan rejoicing in the fleshpots of iniquity, she also saw the eternal damnation that such sinfulness invited. And she saw the buildings of New York City, how they rose tall upon the earth, not in pursuit of the heavenly father but as a way of flaunting the achievement of man. Your aunt saw what it could mean to have such a building in the service of the Lord, and so, using the mind and talents that God had blessed her with, she attached herself to one property, on Riverside Drive, and enlisted the aid of the tabernacle congregation so they could help to make it hers in the Lord. She saw the property as a way station for missionaries weary in their bones but with a conflagration burning in their souls: bearded angels from the plains of Kansas and clean-shaven saviors from the South, men who could countenance their own company because of the spirit so alive and brimming within. Auntie Eve saw herself giving them the rest they needed for the further battles to come.”

“What is a conflagration, Momma?” Vera asks.

“It is a burning desire to do God’s will,” Momma says. “And that is why your aunt produced a brochure of what the building should be, with the men and women of God asleep in every room. The congregation fell in behind her, and Auntie Eve took

possession of the property, but malefactors in her midst, men and women who did not walk in holiness but drank from the cup of envy, allowing judgment to cloud their eye, began to whisper that Auntie Eve was doing herself right in doing them wrong, that money was being spent to adorn herself but not secure the establishment as a sanctuary for brethren and sisters of the flock, some saying that Auntie Eve was buying fine furs and precious antiques with their money.”

“Did she do these things?” Luke asks.

“Can a cow give birth to a horse? No more could your aunt give birth to sin. And yet did the congregation pursue her, asking the district attorney of Manhattan to launch an investigation. Can you imagine anything more painful than to see your aunt vilified in the daily newspapers? ‘She may look like someone’s picture of saintliness, but she is a crook all the same.’ So this calumniating district attorney said.”

“What is calumniating, Momma?” Vera asks.

“It is a man pulling down someone above him with lies and more lies because he cannot stand the grandeur of her vision and sees it as a reproach to his own self-seeking ways.”

“But what happened, Momma?” I ask.

“Even in a court of law, with justice at his disposal to shape as he saw fit, this district attorney could not get an indictment against Auntie Eve. The grand jurors saw her magnificence. They saw her shining light. And so they did not give the district attorney what he was seeking. A torrent of curses flew from his mouth on hearing their decision but Auntie Eve stood strong through all this vilification and even put her laughing thing on him.”

Momma doesn't have to explain Auntie Eve's laughing thing. We have all seen that the angrier someone grows at Auntie Eve, the more she laughs till she is doubled over.

"So Auntie Eve doesn't go to the tabernacle anymore because there were many Judas Iscariots in the congregation and they betrayed her," I say.

"I would not call them Judas Iscariots, my son. I would stay within the bounds of reason and call them misguided."

"But Momma, was Pastor Cohn and his mother all in white among Auntie Eve's calumniators?" I ask.

"Yes, they were among the stone throwers, it makes me sad to say."

"And is that why Auntie Eve no longer worships with that congregation?" Luke asks.

"She has gone where she needs to be, to a church of her liking on the East Side." Momma says.

"And what about Daddy? Why isn't he with us at the tabernacle?" Vera asks.

"Your father must be where no roof can contain him. Your father has powerful currents that must be given expression," Momma says.

"Momma, what does that *mean*?" I ask.

"You saw Pastor Cohn and the words he spoke this afternoon, my son. By your father's reasoning, it is not fair that any one messenger have a monopoly on the word of God. And so your father must go where no muzzle will be placed on his communicating nature if an explosion is not to be heard throughout all the world. Your father has a

calling in the other world, but before he goes he must attest to God's kingdom is this one."

"But if Auntie Eve doesn't go to the tabernacle, and Daddy doesn't go, why do we go?" Luke asks.

"Do not ask me what my mind cannot tell you. Only know that we serve to remind the congregation that we continue to bear witness to the crucifixion, not at Calvary but here in Manhattan. It is not for nothing that we are looking down at Pastor Cohn," Momma says.

In this way does Momma speak to us on that night.

Sometimes in school when I learn something, I want to do it all the time. It is that way when long division and subtraction come to me. I solve the problems in my own arithmetic book and then take the books of my classmates and solve their problems, too.

And when I learn to read, I say, I am reading. A book, a real book, with a hard cover, and a color illustration of an organ grinder and his monkey. A red brick wall and a tree are nearby. But the chair I sit in does not feel comfortable. The cushion is not clean. The living room is not in order. I put the book down. I go outside.

It is a Sunday morning, and Momma's red leather bag is on her bed. The bag calls to me, and because Momma was busy in the kitchen making lunch and my father is in the dining room, I go to it and open the gold clasp. The bag is stuffed with papers, but also contains an envelope with twenty- and ten- and five-dollar bills. There was change in the envelope too, and so I take a quarter.

Momma is coming toward me as I leave the room. I can feel her using her mind to see into the workings of my own.

“Are you holding something in your hand, my son?” she asks, in a voice lowered so only I can hear.

“No,” I say.

“Why is your hand not open?” Momma is looking at me, not the fist I have made.

“I don’t know,” I say.

Momma leads me into the bathroom, where she closes the door and sits on the rim of the tub. Momma holds my wrist but not my heart right then.

“Have you been in my bag? Is that it, my son?”

I shake my head.

“Why do you want to hurt me in this way, my son? Do I not have enough cares that I should have to worry that you are being led astray?” There is sorrow beyond description in Momma’s voice. My hand opens even though I don’t want it to. “You must never do such a thing again.” Momma says, as she takes the quarter. Momma is trying to take my mind and make it hers. But I see fear in Momma’s eyes that my mind is not her mind. I feel something brighten in me, like now I am that train roaring out of the tunnel and going on its way.

Auntie Eve has an apartment we can enter without knocking, just as she comes into ours. Her apartment is at the rear of the lobby, right next to the bronze mailbox. Momma has a key for every lock in the building so she can go where she needs to go. Momma has a key for Avis Ault in room 6A1 and Joy Willard in 11C9 and Raj Singh in 8D3. For everyone.

Auntie Eve's apartment is a place of peace and stillness. It has the smell of baking and expensive furniture you want to look at and chairs and a sofa you want to sit on. Someday I too will live alone, without the clamor of sisters and the fear of my father. Someday I will go to Sweden too, and stand where Momma and Auntie Eve have stood on a cold night under lamplight. I can see it in my mind.

Auntie Eve's apartment gives me a hunger for my own life. Momma has made her lantern-jawed sister big in my mind as an example I must follow.

There is a lock on Auntie Eve's front door and a lock on Auntie Eve's closet door inside the apartment, too. Again, Momma proves that there is nowhere on earth that she cannot go. From envelopes does Momma take green bills and place them in her pocket.

"Momma, is that money to make us rich?" I ask.

"Ushtah, my son. There are no riches on this earth except for the Lord. This is money for us to live." Momma says no more.

With Eddie Perez, from room 7C3, I play handball with a pink Spaldeen against the side of the building. When the ball bounces away, Eddie says, "I get the ball for the ball go the street." But Eddie's older brother, Raul, has seen Eddie run into the street, and so Raul grabs Eddie by the hair and bangs his head against the side of the building. Eddie's head made a hollow sound each time it collided with the wall.

"Now will you go for the ball in the street? stupid boy," Raul shouts at Eddie, who has crumpled to the sidewalk.

Eddie is two weeks mending from his swollen head.

"I need you for something," I say, when Eddie can walk and talk.

“How am I to understand?” Eddie asks. His hair is black. His eyes are dark.

“I want you to be a lookout while I go into my aunt’s apartment.”

“What for I stand your guard?”

“There is money for you and me to be rich.”

“No. I cannot do, for that is wrong. Do you want for my head to be broken in two?”

I have to stand there for a while in my shame. And that night I have to lie down with my rage, that Eddie should thwart me in the way that he has.

The lobby has a Sunday morning stillness, broken only by the sound of church bells ringing on the next block. Auntie Eve has left her ground-floor apartment wearing a fox fur around her neck and slowly walks the few blocks to the subway station at One Hundred Tenth Street. Into the kiosk and down the steps I watch her go. In my pocket are two keys I have taken off Momma’s ring and pray she won’t miss while she busies herself in the kitchen.

The lobby is still empty when I return. I pause outside Auntie Eve’s door and listen for Momma’s footsteps. When I do not hear them, I turn the lock with the key. With the second key, I turn the closet lock. The thrill the sight of the green bills causes starts in my stomach and goes to the extremities of my limbs and into my brain. It is like nothing I have experienced before.

When I return home, Momma sees me, but not with her usual comprehending power, as she is still busy in the kitchen. And an hour later, long after I have placed the

keys back on her key ring, she does not enter my mind but only says, “Have some chicken, my son. Have some chicken.”

Once a year Macy’s has a contest. Everything you can carry out of the store within an hour is yours. But there are so many things to grab—Lionel trains and games and baseball bats and gloves—and the thing is that you have to beat the clock before it beats you. That clock is ticking all the time. You just want it to stop because it is causing so much pain as you try to make the whole world yours in the time you have been given. You want to drop everything and just run out of the store empty-handed if that is what it takes to stop the terror that the clock will beat you.

And then there are the Doberman pinschers that roam the aisles of the darkened store after closing, if you don’t get out in time. Those dogs bite at you until you bleed to death and then they eat the portions of your body that they want to.

But now I do not have to enter a contest at Macy’s with the clock tick-tocking in my brain in a contest I can only lose. I can take my brother and sister to the world’s biggest department store down on Herald Square and buy Luke a six-shooter and Vera a raggedy Ann doll.

“You are a very industrious man and will go far,” the store clerk says, as I pay for the pistol and the doll by placing on the counter an orange roll of quarters and two green rolls of dimes.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Where did you get the money?” Luke asks, in holy innocence. There is worry in his face and in his voice. Luke cannot go where my hands have been. It is not his way to

be a thief in the night or in daylight hours either. It is for me to note this difference between us.

“I just did,” I say, as if to say that I have access to mysterious sources of wealth that neither Luke nor Vera nor anyone else can possibly have. A smile comes to my face at this statement of my power.

But Vera’s eyes speak their doubt, too.

“What’s the matter?” I say.

“Does Momma know?” She holds the bag with the doll against her chest with both arms, kind of rocking it.

“Momma knows everything,” I say.

Luke open the box on the street and straps on the holster. “Bang. You’re dead. Do you hear me? You’re dead,” he says, firing the pistol at my chest.

Hannah

He’s a liar, a filthy, filthy liar. A spoiled brat. When I get my hands on him, he will have no more tomorrows. I will teach him to spread lies. I will if it is the last thing I do.

Momma

All I want is for all of us to be in Heaven together. Is that so much to ask?

Good ‘n Plenty , Necco Wafers, Mars Bars, Milky Ways, Tootsie Rolls, Mason Dots, Sugar Daddies, Chuckles, Goldberg’s Peanut Chews in the red and brown wrapper, Chuckles. At the luncheonette around the corner on Broadway I buy these and other candies for Luke and Vera and Frenchie, the Algerian boy, and all the neighborhood kids. I am Jesus producing the loaves and fishes. I am the sun. I am America.

Mr. Dolphus takes the dollar bill from me. I have come to the counter with a box containing the plastic parts and the glue to make a model Soviet tank. The picture on the box of the dark green tank with a red star on the turret has won me. How sleek and low-slung the tank is. I wait for Mr. Dolphus to give me the change, but he just stares down at me, holding the bill in his hand. He is tall, with hair white as snow and a pockGideon face and bulging cheeks. He does not place the model in a bag for me or hand me my change. Instead he pust the bill in his shirt pocket, comes around the counter, grabs hold of the neck of my shirt, and walks me out of the store. After locking the front door, he frog-marches me up Broadway, prodding me with a knee to my rump, one block after another.

“What are you doing?” I say, unable to fully turn, such a grip does he have on my neck. His knee bumps have begun to hurt and the shop owners and passersby seeing me being led away is like being naked in public. I had thought of Mr. Dolphus as a warm and kind man, like his store, but now I hate him, imagining his face full of stupid righteousness.

Into the lobby he leads me, where he turns me over to Momma, who stands at the far end, near the renting office.

“Is there something wrong?” Momma asks.

“Your son came into my store and tried to pay for a toy with this,” Mr. Dolphus says, handing Momma the bill.

“I see,” Momma says. Momma thanks Mr. Dolphus but says nothing to me in front of him. But I hear and feel the weight of her. I feel it everywhere I am.

Momma says this day is just for us as she takes me to the subway station. On the way we pass Mr. Dolphus, who is standing outside his store in full righteous flower. Momma smiles and nods to him, causing a smile to appear on his own solemn face.

In Pennsylvania Station I run far ahead in the arcade of Pennsylvania Station only to yo-yo back to Momma, who maintains the deliberateness of her pace.

“Momma, do you see the lobsters?” I say, pointing to the tank in the food store window, but Momma cannot be distracted from the quiet she has found. I am hearing and feeling Momma’s mood. Her seriousness is reaching every part of me.

The tabernacle block has none of its Sunday quiet. A ruckus is going on, big trucks entering and leaving the post office loading bays, and many of the buildings that look so lonely on our church day have people going in and out, as if the world has risen up and decided to make itself known.

“Momma, is the whole world going to hell and we’re not because we go to the tabernacle and they don’t? Is that so, Momma?”

“Be still, my son.” Momma said.

But I can’t be still. “Momma, is Duke Snider going to hell? Is Mickey Mantle going to hell? Is Willie Mays going to hell? Are all the mailmen in their gray uniforms going to hell?” I ask, for by now I know something of the world and the baseball players who are in it, and of what they do on green grass enclosed within giant stadiums on Sunday afternoons while Momma and Luke and Vera and I are listening to the disappearing words of Pastor Cohn.

“The world is the world and the way is the way. Now hush,” Momma says, taking my hand as we pass through the gate and come to the tabernacle door. The world is open for business, but the tabernacle is not, as the door is locked, but Momma persists by ringing the bell. And here Pastor Cohn comes, wearing neither jacket nor tie, though his face and hair remain the same. But his mystery mother is not there, she who dresses in white down to her stockings and her shoes.

“Hello, Sister Garatdjian.” I hear our name fall apart in Pastor Cohn’s mouth.

The room where our Sunday school class meets looks different. The chairs have all been folded and placed against the walls. Several women stand on the lumpy carpet: Sister Henry, my Sunday school teacher, so much in the image of Momma, and Sister Hanasian, with the birthGideon a purplish red over half her face, and Sister Floson, with her bad teeth, and Sister Joy Willard, brimming with a love for the Lord that her red and smiling face can barely contain. With Pastor Cohn in the lead, they form a holiness circle around me. Momma is among them as they reach in and place their hands on my head. “We beseech you, Jesus. We beseech you, oh Lord God Almighty, that the light of Your mercy may drive the darkness of Satan from this young life. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, we command you, Satan, to leave. We say, ‘Out now, Satan. Out.’” In this way does Pastor Cohn pray, their hands now heavy on my head.

But what is this thing I hear within me that would give me dominion over my own spaces, the thing that feels embarrassment for them and laughs and laughs and knows nothing of the *conviction* that grips them so?

On the third shuddering “Out” from Pastor Cohn, I slip through their ring and bolt out of the tabernacle and into the street, where I sit on the steps of the tabernacle staring

at the gray mass of the post office feeling the purity of my aloneness. After a while Momma emerges, walking with the weight of sorrow upon her, as if the world has used her up and she has used up the world and now there is nothing more to do but to die.

“You have caused me pain where none should be. What is it that I should be afflicted with such willful children that they cannot abide in the realm of decency and instead treat me like dirt beneath their shoes?” Momma cries and cries. Weeping is Momma so that I should have to run into the street to be hit by the biggest truck to stop my pain. But instead Momma’s tears drive me flat onto the pavement. “Momma, now am I your piece of dirt that you can put *your* shoe on,” I scream.

“Are you crazy, my son? Are you crazy?”

“Are you crazy that you would murder your begotten son? Are you crazy?” I shout right back at her. No one should make his momma die but no momma should make me die either.

“Behave, my son. Behave. Get up now. I will take you for normal food at the Automat.”

I have failed Momma. This I know. My victory has been her defeat. “I do not know what to say to you,” I scream, inside the Horn and Hardart, a piece of cherry pie and a glass of iced tea before me. Now I am crying. I cry and cry that Momma should look so old and abandoned in the light of our Automat day. I cry that my heart has to be so broken along with hers. I cry outside the softness of her that would enfold me. I just cry until I can cry no more.

The vessels of the Lord are lined up for filling. Assigned to goodness, they wait their turn in gowns of white to be received by Pastor Cohn, who stands in the middle of the baptismal font with his pants legs rolled up beyond the water's height. Eagerly do the children entrust themselves to his care, allowing him to immerse them so their gowns and whole beings are soaked through with the holy water of the Lord. "You are now of the Christ and the Christ is of you. Forever are you in the paradise of his vision. Praise God, praise Jesus. Oh, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." Stinky Maldonado, Eddie Goyco, Reuben Alvado Willie Peterson, Peanuts Kozinski the Jones brothers, both Kenny and John—one by one they come for their dip. And among them are Luke and Vera. There Luke is, approaching the font and Pastor Cohn eager to greet him with greedy, straining hands. "Don't let him do it. Don't let him," I stand up and call out, from the balcony pew I share with Momma. "Do not let him take from you what is yours and give you what isn't. Do not let him change you so you will be no more what once you were." This too I say with urgency.

"Ushtah, my son. Ushtah. This is the devil himself speaking. Sit down and stop your serious foolishness."

Now are the men of order coming toward me in their suits, the men who have custody of the velvet-lined collection baskets and who do right by the tabernacle by removing the denouncing ones who attack Pastor Cohn. They had looks of determination on their scrubbed faces, but Momma counsels with them. "He gets upset but I will see that he behaves," Momma whispers. Brother Frudash, one of those men, puts his fingers to his lips in looking at me before going away.

"You are going to hell," Stinky Maldonado says, after the service.

"Fuck you, Stinky," I said.

“Ooh, you cursed,” Stinky squeals, bringing his hands to his grinning face.

“What was that I heard you say?” Brother Frudash places his hand on my shoulder. His lips are very thin, like a long red line in his face.

“I didn’t say anything,” I say.

“No, I heard you,” Brother Frudash says. “Did he say something, Stinky?”

“He cursed at me,” Stinky says.

“Yes, I thought so,” Brother Frudash says.

Momma comes by. “Is there a problem?”

“Your son has cursed Stinky Maldonado. Some cleansing action may be called for. We could wash his mouth out with soap.”

Momma takes me to her softness, putting her arm about me. “No, I do not think so. We will be going for some normal food now. Good evening, Brother Frudash.”

“If I can be of any assistance, Sister Garatdjian.”

“Thank you, Brother Frudash.” Brother Frudash has a big car. He has two sons with big teeth. I see him take his sons away in that car. I see it.

That night, in our room, I stare at my sister Vera, as she lies in her cot with her leelah pressed to her nose. “What?” she says.

Then I go and stare at my brother in the bottom bunk of our bed.

“What’s the matter?” Luke asks.

“Nothing,” I say, and climbed up to my bunk.

Then Momma comes in for our nightly prayer. “My good, sweet children,” Momma says.

“Gideon’s not good. Gideon’s bad,” Vera says.

“Hush, Vera. We will all someday be with the Lord,” Momma says, before turning out the light.

The Reverend Mother is the mother of all the nuns without being their mother. Her white headdress is glowing and stands out from the blackness of the rest of her garb. Her round, unsmiling face is dotted with those liver spots I do not see on Momma’s face.

“You are a wild child. You believe you can live outside of rules and conventions. You cannot possibly know what I mean, but someday you will. We are an Episcopal school with our foundations in England. We do not subscribe to a mentality that incites other children to break out of an orderly double file formation and to run helter-skelter through the streets. Are you listening to me?”

“Yes,” I say. Because I am. I am all ears for her sound of severity while wondering how she might appear without that headdress.

“Can you tell me why you caused the other children to run as they did?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know that you and the other children could have been killed running into the street like that?”

“Yes,” I say. She is talking about the cars and trucks of buses that control the streets of New York City. She is asking me to be more afraid than I want to be.

“Punishment is the only answer for someone with your pandemonium nature. You must leave the school for the day, and you must leave immediately,” she says, making herself the wall of judgment into which I have crashed.

Miss Larkin, my teacher, is waiting outside the Reverend Mother's office with a piece of coconut cake. "Here, Gideon, you must have this to take away with you. You are a part of us. Do you understand?" she says, folding the foil around the cake, for the Reverend Mother has been in touch with her about the course of action that is needed to quell my pandemonium. Miss Larkin does not wear the garments of darkness of Sister Mary Christabel and the rest of the flock. She wears the raiment of the world, a skirt and magical blouse. Her words send me into new spaces. I want to go with her wherever she would lead.

A boy passes by me as I sit on a stoop up the hill from the school and across the street. As I watch him enter the Negro hotel, a feeling of happiness more like crazy excitement comes over me.

While standing under the tattered awning of the hotel, I stare into the lobby. A cigarette vending machine stands opposite the front desk in the lobby, from which emerge three willowy young Negro men, their clinging, flowery shirts unbuttoned halfway down their chests and their thin legs wrapped in tight, shiny pants. Around their pomaded hair they wear dazzling head scarves. Their whole look and the synchronous ditty bop shuffle they have adopted— one arm hanging straight and stiffly down, a hand balled into a fist riding on their butt, and one foot dragging, all of it saying "I don't play. I don't play at all"—is riveting, like a powerful storm I cannot dodge. They head, the three of them abreast on the narrow sidewalk, toward Broadway, compelling others out of their path and mocking time and any other thing life could throw at them as well. I don't know if they are the end of the world or its beginning. All I know is that they fill my mind.

Some minutes later, Jerry comes back out of the hotel, as I was hoping he would.

“Did you want something?” the boy says.

“Did I say I wanted something?” I say.

“Why are you sitting here?”

“Why are you standing here?”

“I’m just standing here. That’s all.”

“Do you want some cake?” I say.

“What kind of cake? I don’t eat just any cake,” the boy says.

“Coconut cake,” I say, and hand him the remainder, which he holds up for inspection before taking a bite and then another bite until he has munched it all away.

Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy have left the school and are climbing the hill. There are a whole bunch of them, including Alison Pauley, the girl I had kissed, over there. They stop and look at us.

“Do you want to go to the park?” I say.

“Sure. Let’s go to the park.”

I go home first to change out of my uniform and into my jeans and Keds and polo shirt. My new friend comes with me into the building and the apartment and he doesn’t defeat me by calling where we live a pigsty because he cannot, not when he lives in the welfare hotel for the Negroes. The welfare hotel is not a house of order. There are vending machines in the lobby and tough-looking people at the front desk. It is a building you enter in danger of never coming out.

We go that afternoon into the lower level of the park and then down by the highway. The cars are racing past, violent the way they always are and full of their own importance. Set in a wall of orange and gray stone is a black door half-opened.

We enter and close the door behind us. A short ways ahead we come to a door-less frame in a gray wall, and through that we also pass. A two-foot drop brings us level with four sets of tracks. Above are the spaced vents in the grass through which I had looked down many times. Some distance to the north we could see the gray light of the tunnel give way to the bright light of the outdoors, where Tall Tommy and Luke and I had been that night.

“Let’s wait. A train has to come,” I whisper. Sounds travel far in the tunnel, and someone who means us no good could be nearby.

And soon a train does come, projecting its light on the wall as it rounds a curve far, far down the long straightway to the south. We reach down for bits of rock ballast, and climbed up through the rectangular space in the wall, behind which we hide, trembling. We hear the throb and feel the vibration of the engine as it approaches, and peek at the gray and white monstrosity as it moseys through the tunnel, letting it pass before jumping down through the space in the wall to the tracks once again. But this time it is not like it had been with Tall Tommy. This time there is something to say to this train that has dared to have its mighty way with the tunnel. We boom the rock ballast off the boxcars of the Wabash Line. We boom it off the boxcars of the Erie Lackawanna, and the Southern Line gets no mercy for painting its boxcars green and hah, the burgundy boxcars of the Canadian Pacific receive the necessary treatment, too, but nothing like the fusillade of joyous fury that greets the heartbreaking red and silver and yellow colors of the Atchinson, Topeka, and Santa Fe. When the train has vanished, leaving only warm rails in its wake, we can hardly stand from all it has put us through.

His name is Jerry Jones and he is my life. He lives in the Negro hotel with his Negro stepfather and Estonian mother. Estonia. The word sounds like a place built with cold stones, where no one can be warm and the smell of fish oil is everywhere. She has a wide gash for a mouth and wears tight blouses over her enormous breasts. She stares a lot into store windows on Broadway, as if she has never before seen the things she is looking at.

“Garatdjian. What kind of name is that?” Jerry Jones asks, when we have known each other a few days.

“It’s Armenian,” I say.

“What’s that?” Jerry asks.

“It’s some kind of country where the dead live,” I say.

“There ain’t no such country.”

“Oh, yes there is.”

“Then how come your father’s not dead.”

“That’s because he got out before he could be dead,” I say.

“My real father was Estonian, like my mother. Do you know what I’m saying?”

Jerry asks.

“Sure. I know,” I say.

Jerry has the woolly hair of a Negro and the broad nose some Negroes have, but his skin is the color of copper. His sister Leah’s skin is coppery too, and yet Leah’s skin is beautiful while Jerry’s skin is marred by angry pink blotches on his hands and arms and neck.

“The doctors did me wrong. I had an allergic reaction to penicillin. That’s why my skin is all messed up. Do you know what I mean?” Jerry asks.

“Sure I do,” I say.

“My real father got runned over by a Soviet tank defending Estonia from the Communists. My real father’s name was Nobleonian, so from now on I don’t want you calling me Jerry Jones. I want you to be calling me Jerry Jones Nobleonian. OK?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Who’s that boy we saw you with yesterday?” Johnny Lacy, in the company of Edward Macy, says.

“What boy?”

“The boy with the funny skin who went into the house of the Negroes,” Edward Macy says.

“He’s someone,” I say.

“He’s someone?” Johnny Lacy asks, finding something to laugh about real hard in what I have just said.

“Are you a Negro, too?” Edward Lacy says.

“I’m—no, I’m no Negro.”

“What are you then?” Edward Lacy says.

“He’s an Armenian. That’s what he is.” Johnny Lacy laughs. Edward Macy laughs. There is just a lot of laughter going on.

Now when we go to the railroad after school, Jerry and I take out our things and rub up against the wall of the tunnel. Someday I could come down to the tunnel with Alison Pauley and we could lie down together holding each other in a little hideaway so the train

couldn't see us as it powers past but we could see the train. We could leave Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy behind.

In the fall we light small fires in the park, burning twigs and dead leaves. In winter we throw snowballs at the heads of the lamps along the park's pathways, cracking the bulbs, until something in us tells us to stop. In the spring and summer we collect empty soda bottles from the basement of buildings and take them back to the stores for deposit money. We gather together old newspapers in the yard outside the basement of my building and set them on fire, watching as the paper crinkles and turns to black ash. We light the fires with matches my father brought home from Jack Dempsey's Restaurant, where he now works. The matches show Jack Dempsey's battered face on the cover. They are all over the apartment. The fire consumes us. Everywhere there is filth—dog shit and broken bottles and scatterings of garbage. And now there is the fire to make it right.

The alleyways call to us. We scale fences and walls and gates. Dogs that bark and dogs that run silent menace us—mangy dogs of no pedigree belonging to the supers whose territory we are invading. Whole blocks we cover through these back alleys, our faces black as pitch. We are *exploring*.

And there is Boo, a very dark Negro girl with pigtails like wire from the hotel of the Negroes, who says to us, "Do you want to do it to me? Would you like that? Because you can." Words that make me go all funny inside. Into the bushes of Dead Man's Hill in Riverside Park we take her, where she pulls down her white underpants and we press against her and make her promise not to tell.

On Halloween we go to those houses of order where we can sneak past the doormen. Rubber masks with a strong, clean smell you can trust conceal our faces. Grownups interrupt their lives to come to the door and be with us, the smell of cooking having spread to the hallway. Their lips are shiny from the food they have already eaten. In our masks they don't know who we are or where we have come from. We have our hand out to the world and it is answering with corn candy and dollar bills and coins.

The subway calls to us. We duck under the worn oak turnstiles, hearing the shouts of the token booth clerks whose laws of order we have defied, but the train comes before they do. Down, down, to Forty-Second Street we ride. Lost in the white lights, we buy a potion with the sulfurous smell of rotten eggs and apply drops of it to empty subway seats so those who get on board and sit in the vicinity will be seen as guilty in the eyes of one and all for the odor they have made.

And there is the roof of our building, with the cedar-shingled water tower and its beanie top, and the parapet of death from which we drop spit down onto the human specks walking along Broadway. Onto the tarred roof of a smaller building to the south I toss my empty bottle of Mission grape soda, causing a man with an antic manner on that roof to shake his fist. I have come from church. The collar of my new yellow shirt chafes, turning my neck an angry red, and so I go to the apartment and change into a polo shirt. By this time Jerry has gone home. When I pass through the lobby, a small, wiry man with inflamed eyes grabs my arm.

“Ees you?”

“Is me what?” I say.

“Ees you the boy throw bottle to kill me?”

“I don’t throw anything,” I say.

“Where ees boy in yellow shirt. I keel him.”

“I don’t know any boy in a yellow shirt,” I say.

“Ees you. Ees you. Next time I keel you. Yes?”

“Don’t kill me,” I say.

Hah to the parties of Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy. They are my school but Jerry Jones is my life and we have escalator handrails to slide down and new routes to the subway to explore. At One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street I do not have to be contained by the covered escalator to the subway station. A window in the covered entranceway offers a new route to freedom. I can climb through and raise myself up between the ties of the tracks and lift myself onto the platform before the train can ever touch me with the steel of its savagely oncoming wheels. This I can do with the mobility that is mine.

Momma asks Jerry if he is a Christian and whether he has taken the Christ Jesus as his personal savior. Jerry says he is something called a Lutheran. “They’re Christians, too,” Jerry says, “and very respectable.”

Jerry’s mother has breasts that are too much for her tight blouse. Her mouth is a long thin slash. What words she says come out as a shriek. To be an Estonian is to be from a lesser country of the world, where drizzle and the smell of fish afflict you all the livelong day. It is a country that brushes its teeth with whale oil while living in another century, and where people sleep in the remnants of castles built in bygone days. This I know because she tells me so, not with words but with what I see. All along Broadway she stares into shop windows, stares and stares. She has never seen such goods before. Always she is alone on the street and there is no need to go near her, for like my father

she has been cut loose to live in the solitude that is the fate of the shunned. That is what happens when people come from Estonia and Armenia. That is what happens when they are not Americans. Alone, alone with hairs all over their bodies, and skin the sun cannot be bothered to kiss.

Jerry's father is a Negro of the American earth. He is lean, and when he cares to smile, he has the power to devour you. Jerry's father has rhythms and features that come out of the cigarettes he smokes and the cabs of New York City that he is made to drive, leaving him fully exposed to the streets and apart from his talents. When I see him I want to fall down in love for the warmth that I am feeling but which he will not allow me to express. Because Jerry's father has Negro wisdom on his face. He knows who he is and he knows who you are, too.

Everything I do I do for Momma. When she gets out the rolling pin and the cookie tins and prepares the gingerbread dough so the sweet-scented smell fills the whole apartment, I stand in the door-less frame to the kitchen and use outstretched hands and legs to raise myself to the top of it, begging her to see me in the glory I have achieved so I do not have to be invisible. And on the street I once again sail beyond the boundary called limitation by shimmying to the top of the streetlight and dangle like a monkey by one arm from the overhang as grownups are beside themselves with constricting fear. All this to show Momma I am exalted by the power that is mine.

There is no laughter from Luigi when I mention Jerry Jones-Nobleonian, who has become my very own and from whom I must never be apart, not even for Coney Island

and the endless summer sands. Luigi's face shows only distress. It says that Jerry is the Negro hotel with its endless commotion, and more.

“Whatsa matter witha him? He a sick? Why his skin have to be a like that?” Luigi says, on the Saturday morning we are to go to the beach.

“Please, Luigi. Please.”

On the beach no one applies the word *underweight* to Jerry Jones-Nobleonian. Other things they say, not with their tongues but with their eyes. Not only Luigi, but the kids who nudge each other and direct their friends' eyes with a toss of their heads. Because the blotches aren't only on Jerry's face and neck and hands. They are everywhere, like someone has burned him with acid or lye. If Jerry sees those looks he gets, he doesn't say. He just goes about on the feet God gave him.

In the afternoon Luigi takes us into a movie theater on Surf Avenue. On a big screen killer ants float downstream on fallen leaves. What would Momma say if she knew we were watching these moving images? Men sleeping in the jungle wake up screaming as the ants eat them alive. Oh, the world, and what it can do.

Momma does not go to the beach, not with her varicose veins so frighteningly blue on her thick legs. The building is not hers to leave on all occasions. She must be there with Auntie Eve for the dangers that can arise and with Tall Tommy and Little Tommy and the other handymen who live in the single rooms to assist.

And there is Pelham Bay Park, in the Bronx, because Luigi can go one way and then another in finding places other than Manhattan. But there are no rides or crowds or sandy

beaches. There is only the bay surrounded by woodland and the rowboat Luigi rents so we can be out on the stillness of the water. In the distance stands a bridge I have no name for—not Manhattan, not Brooklyn, not George Washington—so big and frightening. We are in the deep water now, in the middle of the bay. Luigi has pulled in the oars and he and Luke are causing a rocking motion that will surely capsize us. My fear has come to Luigi's attention, bringing a smile to his face. "It is time for your little dickie to get wet," he says, and picks me up and tosses me into the cold water. Down and down I go before surfacing, the boat a blur drifting farther and farther away and eels nipping at my heels. But Luigi and Luke have turned their backs to me as I doggie-paddle to stay afloat, my arms growing tired. How much easier to give up than go on. Suddenly something has come between my legs. On Luigi's broad back am I lifted almost clear out of the water. Shivering and covered with goose bumps am I delivered into the boat. "How's your little dickie now?" Luigi howls with laughter. And Luke says, "Now you've been baptized too, little brother."

"Someday soon I'm going to give that sister Hannah of yours a ride, and I'm going to ride her for a long time," Tall Tommy says. He has a plan to go to my sister's room, he says, a room no one but she must enter and where she keeps her privacy all around her. Tall Tommy flashes a smile that shows his missing teeth.

Hannah says a thief tried to come in the night. And no, it was not Jesus, she insists. The thief placed a big ladder up against the wall of the building and tried to climb into her room from the alleyway. Then someone stuck a finger in the light fixture and a blue bolt

of electricity flashed there in the dark that gave this person a terrible shock. That was the story I heard. A commotion going on in the world at large. Things big and surrounded by mystery. Things no one could ever explain even after they had been explained.

“Teef,” Momma says. “Like a teef in the night will he come.”

Things happen in the night but also in the light of day. “Signs and wonders are before our very eyes,” Momma says. “We must be open to them wherever they occur.”

Down the block from our building a car braked to a sudden stop and a white man with a towering blond pompadour like a cresting Coney Island wave emerges. A sleeveless white T-shirt highlights his muscular menace as he walks slowly back up that street with no attention paid to the sidewalks of New York City, just a complete dismissal of all the blandness that would entail, saying, *I am stronger than any car, and the road is in final obedience to my will.* Toward him from the direction of Broadway comes a Negro man with a slighter build. Sprinting more than walking, as if some frenzy in his blood cannot endure a patient stroll. He too claims the middle of the narrow street, paying no never mind to the marauding vehicles of New York City. An open barber’s razor he holds lightly in his right hand, Saturday morning sunlight glinting off the metal as he strops the blade against his thigh. Thoughts of slicing, dicing, criss-crossing the flesh of Mr. Pompadour white man with the razor brings a toothy smile to his face. But oh does Mr. White Man take the Negro’s weight and lift him up, not to the heaven’s gate but only to throw him down through the canvas top of the Ford convertible parked at the curb. And oh does he follow after, pressing on the Negro with all his white man weight. And oh

does the Negro struggle to free his razor hand from the grip of the white man and unleash his blade upon such whiteness and make it redder than red. And oh is it only a matter of time before such a thing should come to be, that the blade can slash the white man's eyes and cheeks and nose and throat and examine every abdominal feature that it seeks, the man of Negro rage slicing him into an oblivion that has no end before running a crazy pattern through the streets to his temporary freedom.

What does it mean that a white man is dead in the blood-soaked convertible? And what is the jubilation that drives some of the Negroes from the Negro hotel to dance in the streets? And what is it to be a white boy with fear of the waves of violence still to come after seeing what he has seen?

"Momma," I say, "a white man was made to get up and a Negro man was made to get up and now one of them is dead."

"We cannot have this." Momma says, of the anarchy in our midst. A call has gone out to all the corners of the world for dashiki-wearing Ethiopians and Nigerians and for those in the deepest reaches of the Belgian Congo and for Koreans and Chinese with mathematically gifted minds and bearded, turbaned Sikhs and Indians who shed their dhotis to wear the garb of America, all of them streaking for the universities of New York City to obtain the educations they are thirsting for. Momma says she can house those whose cooking fills the halls with the smell of exotic spices but not those who have violence in their bones and their blood unless we wish to become like the hotel for the Negroes, where only the other week a decomposing body stashed behind the refrigerator in the communal kitchen caused an unbearable stench throughout the block.

The cars of New York City are violent and the men are violent and some of the women (are you listening, my sisters?) are violent and even the buildings will fall down on you if you are not careful.

At One Hundred Twenty-Second Street and Broadway the train emerges from the tunnel and climbs a grade onto a fragile, corroding el towering over One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street. When the train relinquishes its darkness for the bright light of day, it does so under the watchful eye of the Juilliard School of Music and the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Barnard College has a fence of forest green to hide it from the cars and the people out on Broadway who want to look and look and rich soil Jerry and I can sink our hands into for earthworms and an archery range with a bull's eye target and women of excellence going about in the heaven of their own minds. Barnard College has a friendly manner, but the street that we come to beyond its confines is not that way. Cars rattle over the hilly cobblestone street laid out for horses, not for them. Two Negro boys are lying face down in their own blood on those cobblestones and only the arrival of the police on the scene can compel the cars to cease their rampage and detour at a reasonable speed around the scene, the cars expressing their frustration with savage bursts of acceleration beyond the detour point.

The Negro boys are not in death, but lie still with their eyes open, like the fish down on the pier at Coney Island, flounder and fluke hoisted from the sea on the lines of the fishermen and laid out on the wooden slats to expire where everyone can see them.

A burly white-haired man, in jacket and tie, stands with his back to the boys. Two police officers with open pads and pens are speaking with him. Sparks of justification fly from his mouth that boys their age should try to surmount his authority by relieving him of his wallet. "In broad daylight they come at me, me lads. Do I have to tell you what that means? Thirty years on the force and I've never seen anything like it." Yes, that they with smiling impudence should try to topple his regime, making it only a sample of the full-fledged anarchy they would soon be delivering if not held down with the iron fist of those who can be made to get up.

"That ain't right," Jerry Jones-Nobleonian says.

"What isn't right?"

"Shooting those boys like that. That's what ain't right."

We climb on the gray slabs of stone of Grant's Tomb before going inside to the rotunda, where tattered Civil War flags are on display. Down below are two giant coffins. Then we hang out in nearby Cherry Park, right next to the International House, in a part of Riverside Drive no one must ever take away because of its smell of the north and hope and the ache pulling you back into American history.

That night I say to Momma, "Momma, the white man with a gun shot the Negro boys who had no guns, just as the Negro man with a razor slashed and slashed the white man who had no razor until the white man was no more for this earth. What is happening, Momma? Who are these people who are being made to get up, and why?"

"The world is full of guns, my son, and full too of mayhem men of violence who summon their fury as if it is the answer to their every need. But we are preparing to leave

this earth for our heavenly home. Now have some chicken, my son. Have some chicken and Bird's Eye peas and a baked Idaho potato. I made it just for you.”

That the potatoes should come from Idaho and that I should saturate mine with salted butter to make it even more delicious.

Something has gone wrong in the House of Order. Not with Langley Farmer but with my classmate Francis Cartwright, who lives with his father and has no mother in sight, just as Langley Farmer has no father that we can see. Sister Mary Christabel has sounded an alarm about the theft of Amanda Crichton's stamp collection and has set a date for its return, lest the punishment be severe. Within days Francis Cartwright has been squeezed from the code of stealth he operates by and comes forward with the missing collection into the light of day, with his father at his side, who is there to ensure that his future is intact. It is clear from the physical closeness of the one to the other that his father has taken a strong hand with his son and guided him back to the path of righteousness.

Francis has a permanent wound on his face. Though it is not a thing that bleeds, it keeps his face from smiling and in a state of tension that the eye can see.

But Francis Cartwright has special skills that surpass his thievery and his wound. He is quick with the numbers that Sister Mary Christabel assigns us. He dives into long division and scales the heights of the most staggering sums, making quick work of every problem with a Scripto mechanical pencil that needs no eraser. The Gideons he makes on his test papers are light and stylish.

Now my face has a wound that it cannot surmount. The school has recognized the excellence of Francis Cartwright, *skipping* him to the next grade, and in doing so has

caused me to feel like thin paper in a strong wind. There is no way to look Francis Cartwright in the eye ever again. He has won and I have lost, lost, lost, and now he must be driven down into the ground of nonexistence.

For all time has the House of Order proved that it is on the winning side. For all time.

Danny Hurwitz lives down the block in a building with a portico, right before the hill on which stands the hotel of the Negroes. Danny wears glasses and reads comic books with an intensity that shows in his fevered face. When he rides past me on his bicycle in front of bulldog Harry Frug's radio store, I kick the wheel so he and the bike fall over. Danny just lies there on the pavement. His glasses have fallen off.

"Why did you have to do that?"

"Do what?" I say.

"Kick me?"

"Did I kick you? Did I?"

"You kicked my bike."

"You didn't say that. You said I kicked you. Do you want me to kick you?"

"No," Danny cries, and hurries off with his glasses and his bike, leaving me in shock at the harm I have done him and have a murderous impulse to do more of.

My brother Luke is not negligible. When the hurricanes visit us, with all the late-summer ferocity they can summon, making our island a captive of their strength, he roots from the Broadway window of our room for the winds to topple **Harry Frug's** radio shop sign

from the support bar so the heavy thing will crash to the avenue, never to get up again, and Harry Frug can be destitute in the pelting rain and the forces of nature can be triumphant. And there it is, the green sign swinging wildly on the bar, to and fro, and Luke smiling as if nature's power is his own and magnifying him with the strength that it is showing.

And then the sign lies there on the sidewalk, sad and broken. No, it is not crying. No, it is not bleeding, but it is down there on its side, with no one to hold it, no one to love it—a sign so proud of its American goodness. The names Philco and Zenith and RCA and Magnavox, once a neon glow for all of Broadway to see, are now but bits of glass and escaped gas, the whole thing just a piece of refuse for the world to regard with the disdain it can muster, the wind-blown rain lashing the sign good, so very good, out of sight of the sun that has gone away. The raindrops big, like those gray sinkers the fishermen attach to their poles and cast into the polluted waters of the Hudson in warmer weather.

Luke pins me against the wall with his hand against my chest, his eyes ablaze with smiling malice, before he lets me go. From my bunk I watch as he presses his nose into his forearm, as if he cannot get close enough to skin and blood and bone. The room is all his with the silence he has created, as if he can make time itself stand still. In the full-length mirror on the back of the door he later inspects himself, his teeth making a dull sound as he chomps them together. The test results must be good, given the mean smile of satisfaction that follows. Turning to me, he says, "Your blood *stinks*. It's thin as water. The doctor says so."

With my eyes closed I hear his words and wait for him to go away.

Sometimes my brother loves me so much he just wants me to go away, as when he drops a shopping bag full of incinerator soot from the roof of our building that lands with loud force in the alleyway a foot from where I stand. No binoculars are needed to determine the expression of smiling malevolence on his face as he looks down at me from the roof of our building.

But I have my own violence, as when, in retaliation for my brother striking me with a rock in the back in that same alleyway, I toss a Borden's milk bottle that flies in an arc and strikes him on his head as he flees.

When Luke runs to her with blood pouring from his scalp, Momma says, "What is the meaning of this? Are you crazy, my son?"

"Momma, he hit me with the rock of ages," I shout, but Momma has not the least regard for what I have to say as she hurries Luke off to the hospital.

A fin-tailed Cadillac with imperial power has parked below our Broadway window. A rat in some of the finery of the earth, a full-length leather jacket and shiny shoes, steps out from behind the wheel, though Luke identifies him differently.

"It's Oil Can Harry," Luke says. The man wears no top hat or coat with tails, and the mustache he sports is not as nefarious as the cartoon character's, but it is for sure that he has tied Auntie Eve and Momma to the railroad tracks many times.

Simon Weill is the owner of our building, and his arrival summons a dread that will not leave me alone, as Momma says he has the power to place us and our possessions in the cold and pelting rain right out there on the street, with no place to sleep but between the parked cars.

“Mrs. Garatdjian, how are you?” Simon Weill says to Momma. He does not exist on the plane of the familiar with her, and Momma comes back strong and correct in her response as well.

“Very well, thank, you, Mr. Weill,” Momma says, coming back strong and correct in her response as well.

“Is Miss Hedberg here?” Simon Weill asks. He is bold about showing his face to the world with his black hair slicked back. In a quiet, weary voice he speaks, as if animation is against his best interest, but his words travel far.

“My sister is expecting you,” Momma said. “Let us go inside.”

Expecting.

Spice cake is set out on the marble-top table, and the strong smell of brewing coffee has spread through the apartment. Momma makes the same cake, pouring the batter into a round-shaped baking tin. Momma also makes a delicious apple pie, which she sprinkles with cinnamon. The pie tastes great when warm and even better cold from the refrigerator.

“Come, look, Mr. Weill. Have you seen my new painting?” Auntie Eve points to the portrait of Jesus in a robe with a mane of brown hair and a beard against the backdrop of a powder blue sky with puffs of clouds over the doorway to her kitchen.

“What did you pay for that thing, Miss Hedberg?” Simon Weill. He has placed an amused eye on Jesus in the sky, and has said with that one look everything he believes and doesn’t believe.

“Pay? I would have to see,” Auntie Eve says.

From the inside pocket of his jacket Simon Weill slowly takes some papers, putting aside all sentiment in favor of facts that need to be at hand. These are papers that do not challenge love but simply ignore it. "I have here an agreement for the new washing machine you requested. This is a contract with Enritti Manufacturers for delivery, installation, and maintenance of the equipment, with terms of payment specified," Simon Weill says.

"A washing machine? What is that you say?"

"A washing machine, Miss Hedberg. As you may remember, you were calling me several times a day about the need for one." A tone of weariness has come into Simon Weill's voice.

Auntie Eve begins speaking with Momma in Swedish, but Momma does not let her fly away on a flapping foreign tongue. She guides Auntie Eve to the paper that Simon Weill has laid out on the table and places a pen in her hand for her signature, while Simon Weill looks on with shrewdness in his eyes.

"Just remember now, ladies. We are one, one," Simon Weill says, pocketing the signed document and bringing his two index fingers together.

Momma speaks to us that night, saying this: "Simon Weill has a nose for the possessions of the earth. He comes to us with a duplicity born of his own greed and would lay Auntie Eve in her grave like the men who have come before with sticks and knives in the form of account books and forms and regulations that those bound to the earth in their heavy shoes and suits must scrupulously adhere to. They hit Auntie Eve with the word *receivership* and said she must not spend one penny, not one single penny, without a

minimum of seventy forms on which the expenditure was precisely recorded. And so she had to endure a second crucifixion on the cross of regulatory procedure and in doing so made her glory visible in God's sight. From then on it was truly understood that if the ground we walked on was the domain of the worldly wicked, we could live nonetheless with our heads in the clouds and the birds of the air for company. Yes, the vermin of the earth are an affliction. They gnaw on testicles and are a torment to the bowels, but vision must always be the product of suffering, and so the tribulation they visited on Auntie Eve should be seen as the goad to greatness that it truly was. Big were the boils that prospered on her flesh, but great was the humility with which she bore them. Because the men of the earth who had their ledger books and their numbers saw the purity of heart of Auntie Eve but could not abide its presence. It is not for everyone to uphold the truth. It is only for those who possess it in their vital organs.

“Tell us again how Simon Weill came to the building?” Luke says, for Momma has spoken of him before.

“Simon Weill is a product of the ledger books that the men of the earth were armed with, but he also has small margins beyond their patch of narrowness. He has his fine mind and some accountability to the structure of the truth, even if the demons that possess him seek to run riot in the currency fields of green. He came to us as the savior of the savior of the earth in the form of Auntie Eve, offering her a long-term lease and assumption of her debt in exchange for title to the building. But now he goes where he does not belong, appropriating store rents that are not his to take.”

“What store rents?” Luke asks.

“The TV store. The hosiery store. The Drago shoe repair store. The luncheonette. The clothier. All of them.”

“But why did she let them do that?” Luke persists.

“The store owners would revile your aunt when she came to them. They would dismiss her as if she were nothing more than a hanging string.”

“What is a hanging string, Momma?” Vera asks.

“A hanging string is something negligible in the air. If you should see it drifting about, then you would simply say, ‘Hah, that is just a hanging string and I will pay it no mind or I will snatch it and dispose of it as I please.’”

“But why did they say Auntie Eve was a hanging string?” Vera continues.

“It is not for the world to embrace goodness but to shun it. For our reward we must wait for the next world, I am afraid,” Momma said.

“So what happened with the store rents?” Luke asks.

“Would you say of Simon Weill that he is a hanging string? Could it be in the mind of any storeowner to even think such a thing? Simon Weill does not even have to ask for the store rent. It is waiting for him when he arrives. As I have said, the world has sworn its allegiance to the tribunes of darkness while forswearing the angels of light.”

Momma is saying Simon Weill is not Tall Tommy and he is not Luigi. He does not play the harmonica and sing “Home on the Range.” He does not dispatch me to the store for the sausages that sizzle on the grill and that send you right to heaven when eaten on a roll with a slathering of mustard. Simon Weill just stands there in his power that no amount of scripture can ever touch, unable to take him down or raise him up. At all times

does Simon Weill stay level on his own ground and bring the world to heel with the authority of his soft voice.

Momma is saying Simon Weill is our real father. Momma is saying his darkness has dominion.

Frankie Dugan has red hair and freckles and smells like a Catholic and wears wrinkled shirts. He is chubby in his body and in his face and can do a big thing with his bat, making the softball sail in an arc far beyond the distances anyone else can deliver it to on the grassy fields of Riverside Park. And I can catch or try to catch the balls he hits with my genuine cowhide glove with the red Rawlings label that glows for all the world to see, a glove I can preserve forever with linseed oil. Because his power is not to be seen in his easy swing, it can only mean that he swings a magic wand, and so he has the status of a sudden god by this one feature where his excellence is found.

Frankie Dugan does not live on Riverside Drive or in the House of Order, but far to the east on a street of turmoil in an area he calls Yorkville, where tenements abound and laundry on clotheslines snaps in the wind and people spend time on fire escapes and stoops to escape the heat. I am shocked; my heart flies apart at the anarchy I am seeing—a street with no sanctuary from itself, where the sidewalks and the apartments of those who occupy them are virtually one. It is a Catholic street full of the pummeling fists and loud noises of passion children and the saloon features of red-faced grownups. It is a street of the cucarachas, Frankie Dugan says, with a laugh that lifts him high above everything he sees, like the softballs he sends into orbit with his Adirondack Slugger thirty-four ounce bat.

But Frankie Dugan and his family are free to move, and soon do, miles and miles and three different subway trains from the Episcopal school. Momma does not hold me back from visiting him at his new home. I boarded the familiar IRT West Side local to Ninety-Sixth Street, then the downtown express train two stops to Forty-Second Street, the same trains I take with Momma to the tabernacle, before setting out on a new direction to Queens, the train breaking free of the tunnel to find the open spaces of the el, along which it speeds as proof it has no need of darkness to keep itself going. The stations have names that hit me with their unfriendliness. Suddenly I am on a voyage out to sea without the guarantee of a return, even though I tell myself those rails I watch from the window at the front of the first car nest to the motorman's cab are not water going where it will but a tidy structure committed to a destination.

Frankie Dugan now lives in the top floor of a two-family house on a street with trees. "No cucarachas," Frankie Dugan says, to the accompaniment of cascading laughter. Rooms lead to bigger rooms and everywhere the grownups hold drinks with ice that rattles in the tall glasses they clutch.

We go off to a lot down the street where Frankie hits his long fly balls and I hit shorter ones to him. I shag flies, making basket catches a la Willie Mays and over-the-shoulder catches, too.

Seeing Frankie Dugan in his new life feels strange, as if our connection now is growing thinner. I worry for Frankie Dugan, that he should be far away in Queens, as I return to Manhattan, but it cheers me to see the stations with the strange names in reverse—Junction Boulevard and Eighty-Second Street-Jackson Heights, and Seventy-Fourth Street-Broadway, knowing it is not the Broadway of my own but some cold and utterly

lonely imitation far from the familiar on which I depend for the warmth of love—and to soon follow the descent of the train on the tortured metal curve of the el past the Silvercup factory, leaving behind the light for the darkness of the tunnel, with all its possibilities for hiding, and imagining the power of the train itself revealing itself while I press witnessing against the tunnel wall a fractional distance from its torrid path. Momma, of course, waiting for me, back in the building where she can always be found.

In the Times Square station a man approaches on a hurried slant. “I need you for something. I’ll give you a quarter,” he says, shepherding me along with a damp hand on my back and making his anxiety my own. Into a phone booth he leads me and closes the folding door. He has wiry hair and beads of sweat have gathered on his face and neck. I watch as he unzips his fly while holding the receiver to his ear, then hear him say I am to touch his thing, which protrudes big and stiff and veined. “If you don’t, I will have to hurt you.” Outside the cramped booth people rush by, and though they are near, they seem far away, and I have no voice with which to cry out. Besides, his threat controls me. I must give him what he wants. His thing feels firm and giving at the same time, like rubber, when I placed my hand lightly on it. “Harder. Faster. Back and forth,” the man commands. Then, as it swells, I stare in astonishment as goo splatters the black telephone box and drips onto the floor.

The man reaches into his pocket for the quarter he had promised, pressing it into the palm of my hand. “Stay here now for five minutes. I’ll be watching to see that you do.”

I stare at the black box, desecrated with the milky substance, before fleeing among the blur of men and women. Down the stairs to the uptown express I tear, where I

look about fearfully for his presence. There is no use calling out. No one could possibly protect me against this man. Not until I am home can I be reasonably sure that he has not followed after me.

I do not go near Momma with what has happened, and there is no consideration that my father should have a part in such a thing, but I do pick up the phone and speak with Frankie Dugan. I give him the truth as I can, wanting him to see that I was not an agent in my own demise but had simply been tricked into the thing that befell me. Nor do I tell him I have been blessed or made special by the experience that the world has Gideon me with. I just tell him I was there for all that happened and the circumstances that surrounded it.

“It was come. The creep made you jerk him off,” Frankie Dugan says, establishing himself in that moment as being in the world in a way that I am not, and angering me at the same time that I should be so trespassed upon with laughter for a thing I did not know, this word for the milk that came from the man’s body.

“No, no, it was milk,” I insist. *The man had given white milk, which meant that a Negro man would give black milk.*

“Come. It was come,” Frankie Dugan says, not giving me the understanding I deserve for the experience I have had and instead breaking apart the mystery with a fact, making me sorry I ever told him.

But I have the quarter, and I keep it apart from everything else I own. That is something Frankie Dugan or anyone else can never touch.

Abednego Suarez is now on the school premises. He is enormous, twice the size of the other boys, but has the delicate manner of a girl and speaks in a way where excitement is in his every word. "I will tell you something, and this you must hear," Abednego says, flapping his hand while his forearm remains positioned on the vertical, the way Hannah's sometimes is. Abednego has to go down to the death that Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy and the other boys and girl they have claimed for their own are creating for him. They whisper about Abednego. They shun Abednego when he so much as comes near them with his hands of a queer, refusing with an "Ooh" the Hi-C orange and grape juice that he offers in paper cups during the mid-morning snack break and the Graham crackers so very good that are also a feature of our day, providing the energy to carry on. And when he rushed from the room with angry tears, they laughed in victory over Abednego Suarez from somewhere in South America, and laughed too, when, outside the school, Edward Macy called him a faggot and he hurled bricks, throwing like a little girl, after they had already run far, far away, but it was noticeable that Edward Macy was not running with one hand in his pocket.

We do not see Abednego Suarez at school the next day or the day after. A whole week and then another passes without him. He has just disappeared. Then, one day, as I ride the West Side subway downtown, there he is, towering over everyone. Though I want to slip away, I can't, not when he sees me.

"Where have you been?" I ask.

"I goes away. It is a school I so much detested. So many of the stupid boys. I am now at the public school where I belongs. So much better."

I had been one of his tormentors. Not in the way some others had been, but I had gone along, and so I receive his words as if they were as much for me as for the others.

“I make goodbyes to you here,” Abednego Suarez says, some stops later, and gets off without looking back.

Sometimes I whisper the names of the girls Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy have claimed for their own—not only Alison Pauley but Carol Trilling, Sybil Lonsdale, Becky Walton, Emma Burnham—and picture the bright ornaments they wear in their hair and hear the laughter that comes from their mouths.

There is a store sign that no hurricane has ever blown down. The sign belongs to the drugstore on the corner of Broadway opposite the building where I live. That’s right. It belongs to the House of Order. The sign does not swing freely in the wind on a metal arm, inviting its own demise, but is bolted to the side of the building. It reads “Prescriptions” and glows neon red in the night. One day I spell the word out loud and from memory, with Jerry-Jones as my witness, and a door opens through which I can see the sky.

Johnny Lacy is from the South. He was born under a magnolia tree. The air of the North gives him nosebleeds and causes his hair to turn red and his skin to freckle. He runs with his upper body twisting away from his legs, as if the two are of separate minds, and yet does not let his condition, of which he does not speak, keep him from the athletic field.

All of Riverside Drive, where Johnny Lacy lives, is one long House of Order. The corner building that shelters him is of brown and white brick and has the capacity to endure the winds off the river and the depression of gray wintry days.

Every square inch of Johnny Lacy's apartment has a design that I cannot explain, from the window treatments to the carpeting and the furnishings. Where does such quality come from?? How does it arrive with such overwhelming force, speaking of vast laws and powers beyond my reach, a separate race of human beings that only look more or less like me.

If I say that Johnny Lacy is only with Edward Macy and those they have claimed for their own, then I also have to tell you that now and then Johnny Lacy has tried to be with me. But Johnny Lacy's ways are not my ways, his mother and father are not my mother and father, his house is not my house. And if Johnny Lacy does not know this, he knows it it soon. Or maybe he has always known it, *it* being who I am and who he is, that law-abiding ways are his and pandemonium antics are mine.

"Don't fire that BB rifle," Johnny Lacy says.

He has seen me reach for the rifle, which had been resting against a wall in his room. I don't go and shoot him in the face with it, ping his eyes for calling my apartment a pigsty. I am not ruled by hatred of that kind. I just do not care. His house is not my house. His world is not my world. I have no thought for what it might do to pull the trigger but only the urge to do it. And so I ping his ceiling twice before he can grab hold of me and, because he is stronger, throw me out the front door of his apartment. It is all right. The buildings—some of them—have barriers, but the streets have no barriers. Anybody can be on the street. *Anybody.*

My love comes to me when I least expect him, as I am leafing through old copies of *Sport* in a used books and magazines store in the Times Square subway station. I look and there he is, in the doorway, with eyes only for me. They are dark eyes, dark like his long wool coat and his thin black hair. Oh, does he penetrate. Oh, does he say that I am the one. And, oh do I say with my own fearful eyes that he is the one. But I tarry, dear God, I tarry. In spite of all that my stranger has aroused, I cannot go to him, instead placing my eyes back on the blur of pages before me. And when I put down that magazine, he is gone, I know not where, lost to me in the underground mazes that have drawn him away.

Now when we go to the tabernacle and Momma has her urge to stand up and speak her unintelligible words, I too have an urge that takes me from our pew in the balcony and down the spiral stairs and out into the bright light of day. Within minutes I have sped through the Penn Station arcade onto the IRT one stop to Times Square. There is turmoil here, a dense darkness that gathers on the soiled and tree-less streets, and some kind of violence must be near. It is in the fumes of the buses and the solitary men who shuffle in their shaped fedoras.

My love was here. Underground. He gave me the quarter I have yet to spend. He came and went, like the wind, as Momma says. If Momma has a world, I have my own, and it here, on Forty-second Street, where I wait for the miracle to recur in the subway store, where I stand with a used issue of *Sport* magazine in hand. But my love does not come. He does not stand in the doorway with eyes only for me. There are men, yes, but they are not my man, none of them placing their eyes on me for one second, or if they do,

only to move those same eyes somewhere else, as if to say I am not important in their sight. And so I return to the tabernacle, and climb those creaky stairs to the balcony, where Momma still sits. Empty I am, empty, even as Momma is being filled up.

But I keep him in my mind, and one day he is there again, his body covered by that dark overcoat, on a crowded bus on traffic-clogged Fifth Avenue. His eyes, his eyes. They are only for me in that smiling face. And then, as previously, he is gone, leaving the bus before my stop. And there it is again, my fear, betraying me, rooting me to the spot.

Momma has sent me to our dentist, who has an office in the Atlas Building, in Rockefeller Center. My stomach drops as the wood-paneled elevator quickly rises high above Manhattan. Behind a frosted glass door with his name on it does Dr. Millsley operate. Normally I would be in dread of Dr. Millsley's slow drill and the shocking pain when the bit strikes a nerve, but now I was the prisoner of a fantasy so intense I can't be sure it isn't written on my face as I leaf through a copy of *National Geographic*. I am in a bathtub, not with Luke and Vera, as so often I had been when I was smaller and Momma found it convenient to bathe the trio of us together. I am alone in the tub, and it is not Momma who is bathing me but the man on the bus. Every part of me he touches, causing an agony of pleasure I want never to end. Dr. Millsley's patter goes right by me as he selects from an assortment of stainless steel utensils on the enamel tray and begins his aggressive probe.

Hannah is not always happy in her life. She is sad that her life has gone away from her before it had really begun. She wanted to be beautiful and worshiped as a star.

“You must have compassion and you must have love. The trials and tribulations of life are many,” Momma says, when I am vile with my tongue that Hannah is still among us with her black moods and billowing rages.

“Momma, I did not say I do not have love for Hannah. But she is a three-alarm fire. She is billowing blackness. I cannot see her any other way. She walks with her forearms up and her hands hanging down so she can be fast with her smacks. Momma, she lives for smacking and smacking with her tongue clamped between her thick lips.”

But Momma has her distant ways. She is like Jesus looking down from the sky. She has forgotten what it is to be on the ground looking up. “Oh, go on with your foolishness,” Momma just says.

Momma and my father are very much in love. There are Sunday evenings, like this one, when he stops his disappearing ways and holds fast to connection. Just the two of them will be stepping out to go to the Swedish church on the East Side. When Momma and my father go out together, it is not to see people but to see the Lord. Momma has brought my father to the Lord so he can be tethered to something more than the wind and a past that does not speak its truth coherently in his mind. The Swedish church has the structure and the order of its surroundings, the safe and quiet streets that speak of wealth as a barrier to tumult, including a toy store that features Lionel trains. Yes, the Swedish church has the chronic order of the Swedish nation, which demands cleanliness in its house of worship and pews of varnished wood that blaze golden in our sight.

“You just leave these brats with me. I’ll get them in line,” Hannah says, relishing the prospect of her evening with Luke and Vera and me.

“Ushtah, Hannah, must you speak in this way?” Momma has only peace and conciliation with which to address Hannah’s fire.

“Look, do you want me to mind them while you are away or not?”

“Yes, of course, Hannah. I am very appreciative.”

Momma can only hope to douse Hannah’s anger with continuing kindness and understanding. She is a hostage to Hannah’s fire.

The house phone rings shortly after Momma and my father have left. Hannah drags herself across the room. In one hand she holds the receiver, and in the other a carton of ice cream. “Yeah, what is it?...You want what? A new fridge? This is the Sabbath. Do you have a Sabbath wherever you come from, mister?...So you’re a tenant. So what? Be grateful we let you in this building, let alone this country...I’m not in my right mind? Look who’s talking...Don’t you talk to me that way. I know where you live...”

King Kong is playing on *Million Dollar Movie* in the darkened living room.

“Hannah, why can we watch a movie on TV but not in a movie theater?” I say to her, when she has gotten off the phone.

“Be quiet,” Hannah says.

Momma has her ways, and stays rigid within the confines of them, allowing herself, with my father, to only watch Oral Roberts and his faith-healing ministry, live from Tulsa, Oklahoma, on Channel 9 on Sunday mornings. With the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up and his hair falling into his face, Oral Roberts lay hands on some woman in a wheelchair and shouts “Heal.”

“Hey, Hannah, what kind of ice cream is that you are eating?” Luke asks. He and Vera and I are sitting on the sofa, which is really a bed covered with a spread. The sofa

has no backing, and so our heads rest against the bare wall and cause these dark spots that soap and water can't take away. They make me upset to look at, as if everything is out of control and nothing will ever be right.

"Mind your own business," Hannah says. Hannah eats her ice cream right out of the carton. Soon she is scraping the sides of the carton with her tablespoon.

"I was just asking," Luke says.

"Didn't I just tell you to mind your own business?"

"He just wanted to know," I say.

"Listen, you brats. I'm trying to watch a movie."

"You're a brat," I say.

Hannah gets up and slaps me hard across the face. "Now will you shut up?" she asks.

"You shut up," I say.

And so Hannah slaps me again, this time harder. "Have you had enough? Do you need more?"

"You need more," I say.

And so she slaps and slaps and slaps some more, and each time she slaps she has her thick tongue clamped between her thick lips, as if nothing gives her greater satisfaction than to have her hand meet flesh, just as I have told Momma.

"Now will you shut up?" she asks, after each slap, but I just keep talking back to her until she drags me off to my room.

When Momma comes home, and I can have her alone, I say, “Momma, my face was on fire from what Hannah has done. See the anger in my cheek and tell me yourself what she has done and that I shouldn’t kill her. Tell me that.”

“Who is the little brat going to kill? He’ll be lucky if I don’t kill him,” Hannah says, being within earshot and once again holding her hands high and dangling. Like some prehistoric monster she appears, seeking flesh to dangle from her mouth.

“Ushtah, Hannah. He is a child. Have you no sense?”

“Go ahead and spoil him. See if I care,” Hannah says. “You already have.”

“Hannah, I beg of you. I beg of the both of you. Let us be reasonable. Do you wish for me that my night be sleepless? Is that what you wish for?”

Momma is saying something now. Momma is saying she might have to fall down dying if we don’t hold her together.

Now on those Sunday nights when Momma is out with my father Hannah sends us to bed before she begins to watch *Million Dollar Movie* and eat her quart of ice cream.

“I don’t want any trouble tonight, and I mean business,” she says. All my older sisters have their own substance. They are far out there in their own land occupying the reality they have been given. Hannah sends her sense reeling with chocolate chip and vanilla and strawberry and vanilla fudge and blueberry and raspberry delights devoured in the dark.

When Hannah turns off the light and leaves, Luke says, “Let’s pay the Load a visit. We’ll put a blanket over our heads. That will really scare the hell out of her. What do you say?”

The Load. It is what Luke calls her when he isn't calling her The Mountain. It is not the same with Momma gone. Momma has taken her love light with her and left us in the dark. Luke leads the way, I am in the middle, and Vera is last. We are depending on Luke to guide us. Crazy, fear-driven noise we make when we arrive, causing Hannah to erupt from her chair in the dark room, the only light from the glow of the TV screen. Sparks, flames, everywhere the smoke of her fury. "I'll kill you goddamn brats," Hannah screams. Now has she something even better than *Million Dollar Movie* and the quart of ice cream with a tablespoon stuck in it.

Run from irate Hannah. Run from the rage that is hers alone. Run to your beds for safety. But Hannah crashes into our room with locomotive speed. See Hannah now. See Hannah with her hand high over her head in the position she has been taught by the smack master himself. See her take Luke unto herself in the way she must. See her administer to his flesh. See her as she places her tongue between her thick lips and whap whap whaps the blanket under which he hides. See as she seals it into my memory for all time what those thick lips and a tongue can mean.

A man named Mel comes to our apartment to fix the TV. He has a scowling face and hair that falls into his eyes, and doesn't talk except to mutter "fuck" and "shit" as he fiddles with the tubes and wires in the broken set. His bad temper makes Hannah laugh. It made her feel like she was not the only one who ever had a bad mood.

Mel lives in room 3B3, and loves a woman named Miss Bresnihan, who lives in room 5D9. This I have been told.

Vera now has a puppy she calls her own, a mutt with a white coat and brown spots. Vera calls the puppy Sadness. I say that is no name for a dog, but Vera says it is. "Sadness is in her eyes, so Sadness she has to be," Vera says, and in fact the dog's wax-encrusted eyes do show sadness.

When night comes, Luke and I take Sadness into the park on our walk. On the way to the park, we passed the hotel for Negroes and, at the bottom of the hill, the corner building on Riverside Drive. The district attorney for all of Manhattan, the one who had maligned Auntie Eve in bringing an indictment against her, has an apartment in this building, Momma says. The building has an ironwork awning and a doorman to keep out those who do not belong. Oh, what a house of order, surpassing many of the houses of orders I have already made a note of in my mind.

We head south on the top drive of the park, along the bridle path. A low retaining wall made of thick slabs of mica schist run alongside the path. Beyond the wall is the lower level of the park.

"Someday I'm going to get out of that apartment. It will be nice. Real nice. You'll see. And you can come live with me."

"How can you do that?" I ask.

"I'll be able to get working papers when I'm older. Then I'll find a job. I'm sick of Hannah. I'm sick of all of them."

"Momma, too?"

"All of them," he says.

We walk as far as Ninety-sixth Street, crossing the arching bridge over the roadway to the West Side Highway. Along the way I look up at the buildings banking

Riverside Drive. There is a new building of tan brick on the corner of One Hundred Seventh Street. Maybe we could live there. And there is a light burning in an apartment at the top of a taller building a few blocks south. Maybe that apartment will be ours. And then I grow worried that the apartments would be gone before we were old enough to have them.

“Do you believe in God?” I say to Luke.

“When I’m walking like this, I believe in God,” Luke says.

The more we talk about God, the more excited I grow and the more my love grows, for Luke and the union we have achieved. The darkness is a blessing in which this fragile love can be felt, a love that would only embarrass or even destroy me if made visible in the light of day. Even so, I fear I have exceeded the bounds of closeness. In the morning I must recoil from this nocturnal excess.

In spite of all I have said, there are those times when Edward Macy is with me and not with Johnny Lacy, in spite of all the claiming of each other and of others that they have done. Edward Macy does not live on Riverside Drive, like Johnny Lacy. He lives up the hill, toward Broadway, in the building next to the Presbyterian church, whose bell up in the tower tolls so peacefully every hour, making you feel like you are in a small village. Though it is not on Riverside Drive, the building has a high degree of order—an intercom and a clean lobby and landings and apartments that house families with children; it is not the kind where the men and women of the single rooms such as Tall Tommy would find a home. And yes, he has an apartment he doesn’t have to keep other kids out of, for fear of what they would think and say and, as I have noted, a father who has the power and

authority to walk with one hand in his front pocket, as Edward himself has been taught to do.

When I say to Edward Macy, “Let’s go down to the railroads and bash some trains,” he moves his lips to one side of his face, as others have learned to do, and says, “Let’s not, and say we did.”

Edward Macy’s mother is out of the pages of some fashion magazine, young and more beautiful than the most beautiful Riverside Drive apartment. Tanned and tall and thin, with jet-black hair, she makes you fall down dead that she could walk the earth in her white blouse and tan skirt and be a mother. But she has a fire that her fine clothes and fine features cannot contain. It burns in her big dark eyes, like oil set ablaze, and causes her to revile the head of Edward Macy with a broomstick. His head swathed in bandages, he emerges from a hospital the next day. What has caused his mother’s wrath? Was it his thick lips and the way he has of scrunching them? Or was the trigger all that wire that made his mouth a metallic mess?

But Edward Macy regains his power. Once again he can be seen walking with one hand in his front pocket and wearing that smirk.

The day comes when he says to me, “Garatdj, let me borrow your baseball glove. I promise to give it back tomorrow.” The glove is a Carl Furillo model, with a large webbing and with the red Rawlings label over the hand strap. To break the glove in, I have applied neatsfoot oil to the genuine cowhide leather and placed it under my mattress with a softball in the pocket.

Edward Macy is not alone when he speaks these words. He is together with Johnny Lacy in the top drive of the park. I had just bought the glove at Herman’s

Sporting Goods in Times Square two weeks before and do not want to give it to Edward Macy, but the power of them together is too much for me. The pigsty knowledge they have of me is in their smiles, which makes me small and self-conscious in my own mind.

“Gee, thanks, Garatdj. Isn’t Garatdj great, Johnny?”

“Sure. Grattj is great,” Johnny Lacy says.

For all the rest of the day I think about my glove and the angry things I will say and do if Edward Macy is not careful with it. But the next day comes and Edward Macy says nothing about the glove. He just walks on by in the close company of Johnny Lacy and Alison Pauley as if I were not there. All day does he seem to have them as an escort. And so I think to wait after school outside his building on the next block, where I might have him alone for a minute, as now my glove is so big in my mind that nothing else can be there.

But once again it does not happen that I can have Edward Macy all to myself. There Edward Macy is, turning the corner of Broadway, but still in the company of Johnny Lacy and Alison Pauley, as if even in their dreams they cannot be apart. And the three, from afar as they turn that corner, would seem to have eyes only for me. And yes, both Edward Macy and Johnny Lacy have one hand in their front pockets. So now it is for me to stand there and await them given the prison of self-consciousness their attention has placed me in, as Cowardice and Strangeness would have been the new names they applied to me for all the school to hear should I run from their approaching presence.

“Were you looking for something?” Edward Macy says, standing within a foot of me and flashing the metal in his expensive mouth.

“Do you have my glove?” The butterflies in my stomach make it hard for me to speak.

“Gee, Gideon, I’m sorry. I must have forgotten it in the park yesterday.”

“You forgot my glove?”

“That’s what I just said.”

He says his words like a blunt rebuff, as if asking how much more time does he have to devote to this matter and with just a hint that he is running out of patience. That is how I hear his words, while having no regard for my own. Because my own words are not there anymore. They have been taken away. Edward Macy has taken them away, and Johnny Lacy and Alison Pauley. They have shriveled me, making it as impossible to speak to Edward Macy words of anger as it would be to hurl a boulder.

And so I say “Oh,” and give to Edward Macy a smile that says the glove is not a matter of importance. Because the understanding has come to me that I would only be embarrassing myself in their eyes if I made it important. In that moment I see that I have to hide myself away in the presence of Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy and Alison Pauley and be defeated from the earth.

There is a giant rock on the opposite side of the street from where Edward Macy lives. The rock stands between two small buildings and is separated from the sidewalk by a wire fence. Like a remnant from the earth beneath our feet it is, some reminder that nature, not concrete, once had its way on this paved-over island. Sometimes Jerry Jones-Nobleonian and I climb up on that rock and stare down at the alleyway below, and from

that height we can also see the back of the house of order, as we are looking south, to the block on which we live.

On the ground floor of the house of order is a bay window filled with plants. So pleasing to the eye is this rear window, secluded from the street, that I will stare at it for minutes at a time, as at a vision of the harmony that my life to come will be. The plants belong to Florence Wilkerson, an older woman whose stomach rumbles during the piano lessons she gives me. The black keys, the white keys, the quarter and half notes—I have no fever for the world Momma affords me, neither a musical ear nor musical tongue. I neither play nor sing “Hard-Hearted Hannah,” as Rachel and Naomi once did. It is a language apart from my own.

She has a solitary way, Miss Wilkerson does, living alone in that ground-floor apartment right off the marble lobby, with the uniformed doormen and the soft sofa and chairs, and the atmosphere of peace and warmth beyond anyone’s understanding. Then one day it came to me that Miss Wilkerson, with her light skin, not quite white, was a Negro, as it came to me that Herbert Hall, who owned Hall’s Clothiers on the southeast corner of Broadway and One Hundred Thirteenth Street, and who had that same skin tone, was also a Negro. It came to me that neither she nor he was hiding who they were, but they were not proclaiming it either. They were simply saying, if you see it, you see it, and if you don’t, then you don’t, but once you do, you will not see us the same way ever again. You will understand something, even if you don’t really understand. Or you will understand what you don’t understand. But either way, you will keep it to yourself and go on about your day.

And though it has no feature that will attach to my life the word “forever,” I will tell you something else I see while standing on that rock, and that is a man decidedly Negro, with the rich black hue of those Negroes who come to our building from the continent of Africa, and that the man is naked and standing over a sink, and beyond that is stroking his thing in a way that takes me back to my Times Square man, and that as he persists, I cannot take my eyes from him, waiting, waiting, with fear as my god, for the gobs of stuff that emerge pendulous into the air before falling into the basin. All this I see from the rock where Jerry Jones-Nobleonian and I stand. Passion lives behind walls where I can see it not and men have capacities beyond those which they generally show.

There is more life on that block too, proving to me with a certainty that, while Edward Macy might want to have priority in my mind, others can have their rightful place. There is Johnny Donatelli, the second son of the superintendent of the building where Edward Macy lives, who says “you’s e guys” instead of “you guys.” And there is Ingrid, blond and my age, who causes the light of love to turn on in me so that I can hardly speak my name and from her have to run, so much fear and shyness has her smiling presence on the sidewalk summoned, that voice in me saying I must stay away lest I lose her love should she see me as I am.

And there is the rhyme we chant outside the building across from where Edward Macy and Johnny Donatelli live: “Ching chong Chinaman sitting on a fence/Trying to make a dollar out of fifteen cents.” Saying it once, twice, as many times as it takes for the lanky old man with the long braided hair and goatee and silk quilted jacket and whose real name we did not know to emerge from the basement and chase us up the block toward Broadway, the time coming when I look back for an instant to see if he is gaining

and run straight into the pole of a traffic sign, the impact dropping me to the sidewalk, where, as I lie groaning, he stands over me and drops a mouthful of spit on my face.

And there is the game we play call Loadies. We scoop out the cork in soda bottle caps and add melted crayon so the caps will have weight. Small boxes spaced five feet apart and numbered one to eight are drawn in chalk on the street to form an open square. The goal is to flick the cap with our index finger into each box, and whoever gets into all eight boxes first is the winner. If we can, we blast each other's caps out of the way in the process. So there we are, Johnny Donatelli and Jerry Jones-Nobleonian and I, playing Loadies in the middle of the street as Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy walk on by, and we don't go to the sidewalk for them and they don't come to the street for us.

The thunderstorm has come and gone, and now the breeze coming in through the open chicken-wire window in the lobby carries with it the smell of dust. The sun is once again burning up the street and the Nemo Theater down on One Hundred Tenth Street and Broadway is calling in a way I cannot resist. I can go there finally and see a motion picture. On the marquee, as I approach, I see the name *Rififi*. What is that, Rififi? There is no one in America named Rififi. A woman enclosed in a narrow booth tears an orange ticket from a roll and hands it to me after I give her my money. Inside, on the slightly sloping carpeted floor, an usher stands on the slightly sloping carpeted floor and takes my ticket. I have left behind the scorching street, and now the air-conditioned darkness and the smell of buttered popcorn are greeting me. I fumble my way to a seat on the aisle. On the big screen are actors speaking in French, with English subtitles. A rectangle of black obscures the bare breasts of one of the women. What is this wonderful world I have

discovered of soft sets and velvet curtains and giant images projected on the screen? But then a hand clamps my shoulder and now I am being dragged from my chair and back up the aisle. "I caught you, you little brat, and now you're coming with me." It is my sister Hannah. My eyes had only adjusted to the darkness and now I am back out on Broadway and Hannah is holding me by the shirt collar so I do not run away. But how had she found me? Is she God?

Into the lobby she hauls me. "Do you know what the little brat was doing just now? He was sitting in the Nemo Theater watching a grown-up movie. That's where he was."

Momma saying, "Hannah, please," because Hannah cannot contain herself.

"Don't *please* me. I help you out and this is the thanks I get?"

"But Hannah. We are in the lobby. There are people..."

"I'm sick of these goddamn people. Let them all go back to India if they don't like it."

Momma saying to me later, when she could be free of the affliction of Hannah, "Be enveloped in the Lord, my son. Enveloped. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"I understand, Momma. I understand," I say.

His name is Little Tommy, to distinguish him from Tall Tommy. He has come from Pennsylvania to be with us and has muscles that bulge and a girlfriend he beat up a lot, causing her to go and live elsewhere. Little Tommy paints the rooms in the building, applying coats of Hedberg green, a light green that Auntie Eve favors and which he has

named for her. He smokes Pall Mall cigarettes and goes to the racetrack to bet the ponies and stands outside the luncheonette every night waiting for the *Daily News* truck. Of the little rooms he and the other men who assist with the maintenance of the building live in, Momma says, “Pay the size of those rooms no mind. It is their souls which must be magnified, and that can only come through the power of Christ Jesus.”

One day painters come to the building and go where Little Tommy has never gone. From Broadway they can be seen standing on platforms lowered from the roof. Quickly the big blank wall gets two coatings of cream-colored paint. Then, more slowly, words painted in a bright red begin to appear. When their work is done, several light fixtures, with powerful bulbs, illuminate the hand-painted sign so it can be seen by those on the Upper West Side both day and night.

The sign has been paid for by Auntie Eve and reads:

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God
is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 6:23

“Momma, what has Auntie Eve gone and done?” I ask. “Now everyone will know our name and we will have nowhere to hide from what they will call us.”

“Auntie Eve has given the world the truth with that sign. She is witnessing for the Lord. It is something we all must do,” Momma says.

“But Momma...”

“You must have a better understanding of our purpose here. Do you know what I mean when I say that we are living in the last days?”

“Momma, it means that you are saying it, but I am not saying it. You have had your life. Can you let me have my own?” The words come screaming out of me that she would try to take away my life before it has even begun, but it does not evoke displeasure for Momma to see me distraught, if the laughter it prompts in her means anything.

The school is in two buildings and has only the nuns to maintain it. In the basement is the cafeteria, which we crowd into for lunch. On the floors above are the classrooms, and at the very top are the rooms where the nuns are allowed to live. Sister Mary Christabel notes on my report card that I do not obey group rules promptly. She tells Momma that I show a contrary spirit and that a demerit will be issued for each wrongful act. Three demerits mean that the school can have me on its premises all day Saturday .

It is a laughing matter to me when the demerits are issued, as they bring me attention. But the nuns have serious work they want me to perform. I am to scrub the walls clean of dirt and wash the floors. And then the floors are to be waxed. “More elbow grease,” Sister Mary Christabel says, as I apply polish with the rag. Only her face she give me, in that habit, the interior so white and her face so white, as if she her life has been bleached to its bare minimum, leaving only a cold severity. The rest of her housed in that heavy cloak of blackness. Something changes. I don’t want to be in the school for the four hours and the work is hard, but those are small matters next to the idea that she is trying to break me. I don’t want to be broken by Sister Mary Christabel or by anyone. To be broken is to die or something that isn’t good.

My brother Luke has a fishing rod and a Halicrafters shortwave radio and a drum pad and a drum set so he can work on the beats that are in his bones. He can do a feathery tease of the snare drum and clash cymbals and get a deep boom from the bass drum. A teacher named Lenny Malderon is within range to give him the instruction that he needs.

Luke has the mental and material substance of a boy in his mind and body, including the private parts that will take him a long way. He can bicycle far on his Schwinn, causing the whitewall tires to plead for mercy, and he can swim the waters of the Hudson, diving off the pier and bringing a look of amazement to the stoic faces of the Negro fishermen who catch the shad that feed on shit. And he has learned from Luigi to capture the eels in the polluted waters of New York City in his bare hands, and now deposits their slimy substance in the kitchen sink, the whole pale dead mass of them, their obscene whiteness enough to cause a shuddering revulsion. Momma is pinned to the ceiling by the horror of what she is witnessing, while Luke luxuriates in feral pleasure at the hysteria he has wrought.

Luke is a paramount brother. He is not retarded by dust on the window sill or the shabby way the room looks in a certain light. He can go on with his substance, regardless of the weather. And when he can't, he can bore his nose into his arm for endless minutes until he is recharged.

Luke knows things it is beyond my mind's ability to possess. He can create a model train layout that takes up half the room. We have a tunnel of papier-maché where our Texas Special A and B unit diesel can hide before it comes out and a trestle it can cross and a signal bridge and a station where the train can get some rest, and a siding for extra rolling stock. And Luke can hook up the Lionel transformer so power flows when

he turns the lever. Luke and I bought the Texas Special train set on sale in the toy department on the fifth floor of Macy's. And we have a gantry car to make sure the workers get to where the work is going on so the tracks can be secure.

But my mind is not quiet. The Texas Special is not good enough. The red and white colors of the A and B engines are an ugly combination lacking all subtlety. And what is that to have a second engine, a B engine, without a cab? And the narrow gauge "O27" track the Texas Special runs on will not accommodate the nicer-looking trains that run on "O" gauge track. We have been denied the twin A unit diesels of the New York Central, the Southern Line, the Santa Fe. No, the elements are not right, and my mind will not leave me alone that this torment should be.

Winston Trowbridge has a Riverside Drive apartment too, in a building seriously gray and old across the street from the smaller building where Johnny Lacy lives. The building has two entrances, one on the side street and one right on Riverside Drive. If you come in the side entrance, then you have to walk down some steps to the spacious main lobby. At both entrances are doormen who stand ready for you should you not be right for the premises.

I won't tell you how wonderful Winston Trowbridge's apartment is, even if it does make me fall down dead, as the apartments of Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy did as well, too. We are not all the same in our capacities, so simply bow down to it with your mind, his apartment is saying to me.

Winston Trowbridge has a reason for our visit. In his room he has built a model train layout. Over the plywood board is stapled a cover of green grass, on which are laid out magna-traction "O" gauge train tracks. There is a main line around the perimeter of

the board and inland routes and sidings and underpasses through mountains made of papier maché and up and down inclines. A glorious silver and red and gold Santa Fe twin engine passenger train with Pullman cars and an observation car with passengers illuminated in the windows and a baggage car speed along the tracks, while on another route runs a red and black Seaboard Coast Line switcher engine.

“This is incredible,” Luke says, to gap-toothed Winston, who stands at the big black transformer wearing a denim engineer’s cap.

I haven’t come to Winston Trowbridge’s apartment to do any harm. It isn’t in my mind that such a thing would occur. It surprises even me when I throw a switch and derailed the Seaboard engine and the several freight cars it is pulling.

Winston Trowbridge was big for his age, and now there is fire in his small eyes set deep in his pale, pimply face. Like Johnny Lacy, he has a principle he applies in his life. If something offends you, get rid of it. And so he gets rid of me, taking me by the collar and rushing me out the front door.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Luke says, as we climb the hill to Broadway.

“I didn’t? I didn’t have to do that?” I scream at my brother. I can be that way with him sometimes. I can make fear come into his eyes.

“You shouldn’t be doing things like that. That’s all I mean.”

“You do things. You do them all the time.”

“What things do I do?”

“You know what you do.”

“What? What do I do? Tell me.”

“You try to kill me with a soot bomb that you drop from the roof. You hit me in the back with a rock for no reason.”

But he isn't listening, or if he is, he pretends that he isn't.

My father has bought Luke a shoeshine kit, with black and brown and oxblood polishes, buffing rags, and an assortment of brushes. “It is time for you to earn some money. This is America. Don't be a burden to your mother. Go out and earn some money. Shine some shoes,” my father says.

“Where?” Luke says.

“Where? On the street. Have you no eyes? Do you not see all the boys around this city shining men's shoes?”

“I don't want to shine shoes on the street,” Luke says.

“You don't want, you say? What do you want? Do you want for me to become aggravated? Is that what you want?”

“I don't want anything,” Luke says.

“You don't want anything? Well, I want something.”

My father takes off his black wingtip shoes. “Here. Shine these. And shine them well. Do you understand, my son?”

“What?”

“I said, my son, shine my shoes.”

“Why?”

“Because I am your father. That is why.”

Papandreou's florist shop is right next to the Whelan's Drug Store on One Hundred Tenth Street and Broadway. Mr. Papandreou's hair is as gray as the smock he wears over his shirt and tie. "Work, work. Run, run. You'll be rich someday," he says. It is Christmas break and he sends me off throughout the neighborhood with bouquets and potted plants, and a song of joy begins in me as I make my way through snow-filled streets, imagining Momma being so proud of me. The buses of New York City have chains on their wheels that say *click click, click click*. The boys of Broadway stand on snowbanks and punish the buses with snowball blasts at their closed windows so the startled passengers can fly back in their seats but I am too busy for that now—*I am working*.

Soon my pockets are bulging with tips, and in a state of near-delirium, I go down with Luke to Macy's to pick out a gift for Momma. A set of Gideon down plastic dinnerware catches our eye. The dinner plates and smaller plates and bowls are bright red, and others are bright orange or dark blue. And there are cups with saucers in the same colors. Now we can get rid of the cracked and chipped and mismatched dinnerware and have the beginnings of a house of order like Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy. Let me not try to imagine the happiness on Momma's face when she tears off the gift wrapping and opens the big box.

The colored lights on tree that stands in our living room offer the warmest electrical glow—orange and blue and red and green and all the colors that can make your heart long for things it does not know. But the lights must be off when we sleep. We know their treachery factor is high. We know they are waiting to burn us as if we bear the name *iniquity*.

But Luke is a surprise. He has no happy notions for my life, or if he does, they get obscured by dark clouds only he can see arriving. No sooner do we set the box under the tree than Luke wheels and socks me in the stomach. Onto my knees I sag, unable to draw a breath and unsure I will ever breathe again. But my panic is of no concern to my brother. Why I think he should care I don't know, as he has inflicted the injury, but I don't expect the malevolent smile with which he meets my upturned face.

Not a day goes by that Momma doesn't think of Rachel. "She has such a fine mind," Momma says. "All my children have fine minds," Momma adds, saying what may not be true. And now, because it is Christmas, Rachel will be riding the train down from the north where she has been at college. Just because she has gone to the north does not mean she cannot come back. And just because the front door is closed doesn't mean she can't walk through it. And just because Momma comes toward her with a cry of delight does not mean Rachel cannot push her backward into the Christmas tree, toppling Momma, toppling the tree, causing gifts to be crushed and bulbs to be broken in the rebuffing stance that Rachel now is showing.

Momma sits with full understanding of what a daughter can and will be with the collapsed tree on top of her till Luke and Hannah and I can come to her rescue. Because it is not for Rachel to give a helping hand to one she has disposed of in this way, not when the fever is still upon her. Father has received word of the insurrection and now roars into the living room like a locomotive in full throttle, his smacking hand positioned high above his head so maximum power can be brought to bear. He is not in his robe of plenty but wears only an undershirt so his hairiness can be exposed, tufts of it on his shoulders

and his back. Father discharges no words from his mouth. He does not say, "Have you made me to get up?" He does not say, "Have you assigned me your death?" No. But even so does Rachel sense his silence coming. There are no holding patterns here as she flees for her very life out the front door through which she came.

The absence of serious annihilation brings only small relief, for now there is the matter of Rachel's monstrousness, that she would so embrace the realm of cruelty in the ingratitude to Momma that she showed. It is for me to cry and cry and to regard time as the enemy of my life in the demands it makes upon me to rectify immediately and in all ways the delinquency of these older sisters of mine. Momma, I am here and I am sound and I am on the earth to do your will with the straight line I now must walk, I shout. Now must I live even more fully in the embrace of her goodness. Now must I see even more the whiteness of her light. Now must I assume the full burden and make things right. No one exists but Momma. No one has ever existed but Momma. No one ever can.

Sometimes I do good as well as bad for the school. A prodigy is in our midst, Sister Mary Christabel says. We must sell the blue and yellow tickets she gives us so people will come to McMillan Hall at Columbia University and hear Chung Wu's piano recital. Chung Wu is new to the school. Ticket after ticket do I sell, going door to door in the buildings of Riverside Drive. When the music plays, I am far away from its sound, eating chestnuts roasted over a charcoal fire that I have bought from a vendor outside McMillan Hall. In a small bag has he given them to me. And then I say, a concert is inside. There I must go. My chestnuts come with me. I sit on the aisle. Down below, on the lit stage,

Chung Wu is bent over the keyboard. He is dressed in a coat and tails. His black hair falls over his forehead. The music he plays makes me peaceful, there in the dark.

Sister Henry is bathed in the love of God at the Friday Bible school and would take us to her warmth. Pastor Cohn and his mother in white are not to be seen. His disappearing words will not be with us again until Sunday. Luke and Vera and I have come from the Episcopal School and the nuns of severity to be with Sister Henry. She tells us of the rocks of old, and the men in robes who walked upon those rocks and knelt down to God before Jesus was so much as on the earth.

There are doors that Sister Henry comes out of but which we ourselves must not go through.

Something is happening. The trains are nearby, in Pennsylvania Station. And the trucks of the post office are just outside. I can hear the rumble of both. And the pages of my gilt-edged pocket Bible are stuck together. And the words “verily, verily” float through its leather cover and dance naked around the room.

Hannah is waiting outside the gated entrance. Though darkness has come, the sun is in her face. Gone are the scowl and the slapping position of her hands. With Hannah is her friend Hazel. They have come from somewhere in the world to be with us.

The street slants downward. The small buildings for the men who live alone. A parking lot. On the other side the post office, the windows burning bright in its gray façade. And beyond, beyond, the triumph of columned Pennsylvania Station. It is all the same but different.

Hazel is plump, like Hannah, and her volume is turned to loud, also like Hannah. Clouds of smoke come from her mouth. Makeup and mascara layer her face. She is getting married, she says. A man named Charlie. That my sister should have a friend. That she should come out of a different door than the one she usually appears from.

IRT. It stands for Interborough Rapid Transit and is like no other subway in the system, running on a narrower gauge track. And it does not only love Manhattan, but will shine its light on the Bronx and Brooklyn as well. Now the subway is Brooklyn-bound through a long stretch of tunnel during which there are no stations to stop at. Ocean water is all around us, waiting to get in. The train has no time to fool around once it leaves Wall Street. There is no shilly-shallying, no dawdle-dancing, as it streaks for Clark Street. But for every ten yards on the straightaway, there are ten yards more.

The St. George Hotel comes down from the street to meet the Clark Street station. An elevator. An arcade of shops. The world's largest indoor swimming pool, a sign says.

Luke cannonballs off the high diving board, arms around his bent knees, parting the water violently. He does back flips and twists, parting the water cleanly.

I stay in the chlorinated water until goose bumps cover my flesh and my lips are turning blue and my teeth are chattering. There is a steam room where old men with breasts and big bellies and skinny legs stand in the mist. I feel safe and warm sitting on a bench in the clouds of hissing steam. No more cold water for me. Not now. Not ever. No cold must ever touch me again. There is something I want from these old men. Excitement rises in my blood. But now the goose bumps are gone and my skin is wrinkly and itches, and so I flee from the steam room's damp warmth.

I return to the pool, where even with a towel around my shoulders, I am cold. I see Luke and Vera in the crowded pool, but I am far away. My body is disappearing before my eyes. My feet are bones. My legs are bones. The screams echoing off the tiles, the reckless dives from the high board, the sound of bodies impacting with the cold water are too much. I find a shower stall and give myself to the warm stream from the nozzle. But Luke looks in, his wet black hair plastered to his head. He stares down at the lower part of my naked body. "Mine is twice as big as yours," he declares. A jack o' lantern grin lights up his face. He has been waiting forever to say these words, to smite me by driving me so deep within myself that I can never come out.

Hannah has a private part, too. One night she is in the narrow hallway that connects Momma's bedroom and my own to the rest of the apartment. She wears a robe that hangs open. There is a dark patch below her waist that can only be one thing. I am seeing what I am not supposed to see. Some jolt of electricity sends me flying backward through the wall and into space. Deeper and deeper into the universe am I driven, and yet I am still not safe from what I have seen.

Hannah has her own worldliness, a course she must chart for her own survival. She does not sing about hard-hearted Hannah, the vamp of Savannah, but she does other things. My father gave her the name Armenouhi so she would be his Armenian daughter forever, but the call of America was too strong. She threw the fifty-pound name in a ditch so she could be free, and now it sits there, sad and neglected in all weather, so soiled that no one dare touch it.

Broadway is not a straight line. If it is allowed to go far to the north it will break free of the clamor of buildings and houses into the trees and reclaim the purity of another time. To the south it winds so you cannot see from one end to the other, not even on a clear day. Stanley's Cafeteria is around a bend, and has more space than it knows what to do with. If you enter you must remember to take a ticket from the dispenser machine. The men and women behind the counter, where the hot dishes and sandwiches and soups and desserts are served, have to punch your ticket. The more you buy the more they punch. It is a place that you worry things could be out of control even as you eat your lemon meringue pie, but it has bright lights that remind you there is a world.

Momma says that even though the war has used Tall Tommy for its own purposes, he must hold his own in the single room she has given him. "He is a grown man. He must not be a lazybones and lie down and die," Momma says, and calls him from his room, saying the building has urgent need of him.

It is for Tall Tommy to shovel ashes and burnt cans and glass bottles that have burst in the heat from the basement incinerator into the metal garbage cans and haul them up the ramp on a hand truck. And then it is for him to work closely with Auntie Eve on her mattress strategy for the building. From one floor to another does Tall Tommy lug single mattresses and double mattresses, those that are stained and those that have no blemishes upon them. The bigger ones he carries on their side. The smaller ones he makes light of by transporting on the top of his head.

“Now we must move them once again,” Auntie Eve says, after Tall Tommy has dragged or carried four mattresses from their rooms to other rooms. But Tall Tommy is tired. There is sweat on his brow and he is breathing heavily. When he shows some crossness, going against her with words in challenging her mattress strategy, Auntie Eve places her laughing thing upon him. It is laughter that comes so strong as to leave her weak and helpless. It is laughter that slides her down the wall and to the floor, where doubled over, she laughs and laughs, her laughter speaking for her now that such foolishness should be here upon the earth.

Momma has made a decision. She has based it on her wisdom. She will keep my father away from me so he can focus entirely on the Christ Jesus, because his condition gets too great if he has responsibility for my life. He can only do what he can do, according to Momma. And, of course, it is a conclusion I too have come to too, based on all the facts that I have gathered.

And yet it grieves my father’s heart that he cannot be a part of his children as Momma is a part of us. And so he says to Momma, “*Momma,*” for Momma is Momma to him as to us, “Momma, I must go with my sons to Coney Island. I cannot have it be that the men of the building are with them and I am not. It is not as a man should be to be walking the streets of Manhattan alone without his children, to be sitting in the Horn & Hardart Automats alone without his children, to be preaching the word of God without his children. Where are my children, Momma? Where are they, that they vanish from my sight and go where I do not?”

My father runs toward silence. No effort is worth making that requires noise, except the warning that comes before the smacking and the smacking itself. But on the Saturday that we are entrusted by Momma to my father's care, that is not so with Luke, who must be boisterous in his reckoning with the out-of-doors, chasing after the pigeons and casting down his top on the pavement with the hope that it will spin forever. My father sees the anarchy of Luke's way calling attention to itself, and so he lashes out, right there in front of Harry Frug's radio shop, where Harry Frug himself stands in his chunky stature, stubble dotting his double chin and a smile of wily smartness filling his face. His eyes shrewdly assess us behind the thick glasses, with Zenith and Magnavox and RCA and Philco in the store windows and the sweet smell of vinyl records in his hairy nostrils.

"Ow. Why did you have to go and hit me?" Luke says.

"Do you want more, my son? Do you want more of my hand?" my father says, redness showing on my brother's face where he has been struck.

"Leave me alone," Luke cries. Yes, Harry Frug sees all this, the features of my father's condition that the ministry and the literature of A. A. Allen cannot address. He sees my father out on the street without a shop of his own, for what shop would have him with the temperament he is showing?

And so I say to Luke, in a voice that is mine and mine alone to hear, Oh, willful one, you who would seek to find what is not there to be had in the way of an embrace and so take the slap to the face instead as the sign of Daddy love that you are seeking, Why must you be bonded to your own stupidity, rather than run off into the green pastures of aloneness and there find your freedom? Can you not wed yourself to something more than our father's hand?"

These words I speak to those near and far with ears to hear.

Is it wrong to say my mortification is fatal that Harry Frug should see this soreness of my father reigning in the morning light right here on Broadway? What can be the significance of the event but that it renounces me forever from the jurisdiction of my father, and for a reason that shouts its simple essence every second that I breathe—it is simply too painful to be with him. Time would have to cease for me to bear the agonizing fear of his aggravation rising so he is made to get up. For while Luke can endure my father's blows, for me they are the offerings of destruction and catastrophe, the cancellation of the eternity into which I must be bound.

All of the shop owners are now standing in front of their establishments for the procession of shame we have undertaken, but my father is elsewhere with his mind. My father does not put the regard of others upon himself. He has his own drum, and its beat is a sound only he can truly hear.

We know better than to ask my father for pennies for the salted peanuts or small boxes of Chiclets gum in the vending machines attached to the columns. No train is sleeping on the middle track. There are only trains in active pursuit of their destinations. My father has prevention in mind in pinning us severely to the wall with his arm as the local roars in so no sly accident resulting in death can occur. It is part of the caution of his ways to be fearful in our midst.

Because he has a handkerchief that he wets with his saliva, he can administer to Luke's injured face, dabbing at Luke's cheeks and brow in a restoration effort. Nothing good can come from him touching my face with that same rag, though as he does I

commit myself to not dying from what he has put upon me, the smell of him so acutely strong in his spit.

My father has skinny legs and arms, causing me to see where my own have come from, and his exposed flesh cannot be proud in the open air, given its whiteness and the predominance of hair, where American skin, so tanned, so hairless, sings of the sun that has been kissing it. My father's flesh speaks of its own fatigue, while his bones are protruding where visibility should not be.

Luke is adamant in his enterprise of making the water his own. He does not stand on politeness or timidity in wading forward in a straight line. No twisting as the first wave breaks against him. No. He dives right into its momentum, its cresting strength like the pompadour the doo wop boys are affecting everywhere we go, with street corner harmonics the nature of their sound. And even if the wave does with him as it will, bringing his progress to a halt, the ocean can only check him temporarily, for there he is raising and lowering first one arm and then the other into the surf while holding his face steady below the surface in a statement of his intimacy with the depths he is seeking. He is simply powerful in his assertion of where he must go. I have no vision by which to see but through the lens of fear as to where his action is leading as he moves out beyond the breakers.

Momma says Luke has the substance to go far, that he is her little man of strength, but I wish he would be more than a speck upon the water so once again I could breathe. Where his ability has come from I cannot say, anymore than I can know why he has flesh I do not possess.

Behind me the Ferris wheel rotates slowly, high above the boardwalk, its passengers sitting in those little boxes. On the beach itself are sunbathers gathered under large umbrellas with their coolers and radios. Among them are two Negroes, young and male, of New York City. They have come to where the water meets the shore, and put down towels far back on sand that stands little chance of getting wet. But the men of the well-oiled pompadours, so white in their strength, won't let them be. They have an aggression pact with their own minds. Nothing could ever be as satisfactory to them as the deaths they now are seeking with fists incited to the striking point, for they know the symbolic intent of the Negroes positioned on the beach, how they have it in their calculus of divinity to spread and spread and make the white man nothing but a small proportion of the world of darkest blackness still to come.

I see the Negroes rise from off their towels. I hear them speak in the angry tones they summon. I hear the rush of fury in their words and the high alert their systems now are on in meeting the eradicating impulse of the whiteness delegation head on. But they are two and the whites are many. When the war comes where peace had been, when I hear the thwack thwack of fists on flesh and see the Negroes returned to the hot sands by the blows that they receive and the whites raise metal garbage cans to wreak devastation profound upon their fallen victims' skulls, I must retreat to the water's edge that the flames of violence not burn my flesh a thousand times more than the sun is doing. The violence is in me and around me. It is in the sands now speaking and the molecules of air that maintain their unseen power. It is in Luke who has vanished over the horizon and in my father, now the peacemaker, lurching in protest toward all that he is witnessing. My

father tries. He so very much tries to halt the merciless scene, for his own sense of justice has been awakened.

The white men of the pompadours do not take the pleasure they derive from their fists to my father's face. They do not break his nose or split his skull. Nor do they hear him as he screams that they must be arrested for such a crime and as he calls out for an ambulance to be on its way so that the bludgeoned Negroes can be rescued from the course of perishing that they are on. The white men of aggression flee into the crowd that has made them their own. They are the vanguard of freedom, the crowd shouts. They are patriots of the old and current order that now is threatened. They are fists upon the flesh of the anarchy that is coming to throw garbage on the streets, to break the windows of their orderly homes, to steal their wives and rape their children and molest the very air they breathe with the maddening dedication of these Negroes to the moments that they breathe.

I see, under the scorching sun, the two Negroes of New York City bleeding into the indifferent sand. I see no one to comfort them but my father. I hear the ambulance of mercy screaming in the distance, but all I really see and hear is the fury of America set on perpetrating annihilation as I tremble at the water's edge waiting for Luke to make himself bigger than he presently is.

Momma says it filled my father's heart with such joy and love to be with us that he would again like to take us to Coney Island.

"I can't," I say to Momma.

"You can't? Why can't you?"

“Because Momma, I can’t.”

“Your father will be very hurt.”

“Momma, the day is waiting for me. It has open spaces. There is light in every corner of the street. Do you want me not to breathe?”

“Do what you must, my son.”

There is a stoop next door with a complicated entranceway where I can peer over a wall as I wait for my father to emerge with Luke and Vera. I can be near my father but away from him, as I can be near the trains but far from them as they move through the tunnel under the park. The building is of brownstone and small and full of mystery. It has apartments I have not seen, where people lie in their beds in seclusion from Broadway. It has a fat man who rides a white motorcycle and who bellows arias in the night. And it has an old Negro superintendent, **Otis**, who smokes a cigar and says to me, in his slow-talking way, “Gideon, blow your trumpet loud.” It’s what Otis always says to me, talking to me without really talking to me. Otis has come up from the basement, where he lives, with his scary German shepherd that looks like a big wolf. “Say,” Otis says, “Is that your father and your brother and sister coming out of your building?”

“Yes,” I say.

“They look like they going someplace and you look like you going no place. Why you don’t run and join them?”

“My momma said it’s OK if I don’t,” I say.

“Your momma know a lot. She know a whole lot.”

The coal truck has arrived, and soon a load of coal is sliding down the chute with a racket of sound into the basement. And there is the old Jew with his hand cart calling up to the tenants on the block, "I buy old gold."

"You take care now, Gideon. And blow that trumpet. Blow it. You hear?"

The playground in the park has jungle Jim bars and swings, a slide and a seesaw. Outside the fence sits Dickie Man. He has a fevered smile on his old face. "How's your dickie today?" he says, his words causing an internal commotion that sends me flying away. Dickie Man, old and gray and with bad teeth in that cruel mouth, is so ugly, but his words own me. He has thrown a lasso around me with those words, and now, as far as I have run, I am pulled back, back toward Dickie Man. Dickie Man will take me into the railroad tunnel. Dickie Man will take me into the bushes. Dickie Man will take me where my father never could. Dickie Man, where are you? Where are you? Dickie Man is not on the bench anymore. Dickie Man has gone away. Bad, Gideon, bad, that you ran from Dickie Man when you could have stayed.

Momma says we must go where the fresh air can be found. She says the country awaits us in all its green glory so our days can be normal and involved with the peacefulness of nature. A man named Phil sweeps Vera Severa and me into his waiting car. He drives us on highways I have never seen with the window rolled down and his arm upright in the frame. From daylight into darkness does he drive, and now the stars are high above and singing. In front of a house does he deposit us. A woman who says her name is Helen

stands with her two daughters, one of chunky strength and the other with the word “beauty” stamped on her forehead. We are led to a room upstairs with a skylight that allows the stars to keep an eye on us.

When I wake in the morning the bed is wet. Helen says she cannot breathe in such an atmosphere of chaos and is angry that I perform this way but I escape down the carpeted stairs. A fruit bowl with apples is on the table and beyond the door a bicycle exists for my riding pleasure. It has an orange frame but no fenders, allowing the balloon tires to come alive with thick prominence. Around and around the circular dirt road I go. When I grow tired I get off the bike and kiss it and say it is all mine. “I will never leave you,” I say to the bike, and shed hot tears to show my heart is true.

The night comes again and Phil and Helen are playing poker with some guests. They see each other and raise each other and ante up as chips of different colors fly. One player is holding his cards close to his vest and showing a poker face, someone says. Wine and cigarette smoke and loud laughter are everywhere.

Helen has outfitted my bed with a rubber sheet. “I do not want you crying me a river in the middle of the night,” she says. The girls lie to either side of my bed, and Vera Severa farther away. Downstairs the commotion of sound continues, traveling far into the night and back again. The grownups have intensified their pleasure in the worldliness they have found, being far from the tabernacle of wrath on west Thirty-third Street. I cannot contemplate a fire everlasting when I am in their midst. I must have other places to go with my mind.

Betty, the older daughter, asks me if I would like to hear a story. I sit up and come close to the girl smell of her wet hair. Then I lie back down, flat on my back. “Yes, yes.

Tell me about the trains. Do you have any? Do they come near? How far must I go to get to them?" The laughter from below is flying up like bullets through the floor. It tears through the ceiling and somewhere into the sky.

"Paula and I were walking by the railroad tracks..."

'Wait, wait. Walking where?'

"Near here. Now let me go on. We were down there by the tracks when the train came along."

"Was it a freight train or a passenger train."

"It was a very long freight train and made a lot of noise."

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Just yes. Go on. Go on."

"The train finally passes us, and then it stops all of a sudden and these men from the train, they grab us and take us into the caboose."

"What?"

"What do you mean, 'What? That's just what they do.'"

I sit up and scream at Betty. "But what happens? What happens?" If Betty sees that I am desperate for an answer, she still says it is for another night to know, and Paula — what kind of cold name is that?—says, "I want to go to sleep. I'm tired." What reason can they have for not being alert to the injustice that has happened? Does no one see the danger they are in, with every passing second the motion of the train taking them farther than their point of origin? Who can find them when they have gone so far away? Who will bring them back?

Phil and Helen remain alive. There has been no fire for their worldly ways.. Phil takes the wheel so we can go to a state park and watch the fireworks shower the sky on the Fourth of July. Though Massachusetts is another state, it is permissible for this to happen. Phil drives with his sleeves rolled up on his biceps and his left arm upright in the open window. “Women drivers,” Phil says. There is scorn and dismissal in his voice. He is standing on a fact that requires you to fall into line behind him.

Massachusetts is a space that has not been filled. There are no tall buildings abounding. There are just people standing in a big field watching the sky light up with giant roman candles and showers of blessings and streaking meteors with their own explosive patterns. The fireworks come singly and as a bombardment of falling colors in the sky. They open with a thud in the air and the people go “ooh” in gasps of appreciation. The Fourth of July is red, white, and blue. It is people in the park in the dark.

Phil puts the car in gear. He backs out, then he goes into forward motion on all the roads he is privileged to drive. I am lost but Phil is found. He has contacted a doughnut shop to stay open for us. It hangs there in the night, with nothing else around, and operates in a silver light.

A chocolate doughnut is delivered to us. Never has there been a doughnut such as this, glazed and golden and topped with a thick ring of chocolate that will never let you get away. Oh, to surrender to such a doughnut in a car full of people in the dark of Massachusetts, to devour it to the point it cannot be seen, and to then be told there is no more, my mind committing to memory this abortion of the eating process.

All that summer are Betty and Paula unrelenting in the nighttime tale of what their railroad abduction has come to mean, that they should be the captives of the men of the caboose and taken far from those who can love them where their roots had been established, and I can only carry the ache I feel for their removal with me into sleep. In the morning, when the sun kisses the earth, I can rise up into good feeling, with cereal and clean surfaces and the circulating journey that I take on the fender-less bike that loves me so. Every day now a woman rushes out of the bushes to offer me iced coffee, a treat I take to, that I should have for my mouth something other than soda and water.

Then there is a dump truck laden with steaming asphalt on an intersecting road. The smell causes delirium. The work crew are out there in jeans and boots. When cars come, they listen to the traffic cones and go around them. . A steamroller ensures that everything is on the level. The men are on the ground. Light and strength are everywhere.

Later there is a farm. Chickens everywhere, busy with their erratic struts. A man holding an ax rushes out of a rundown house. The headless chicken does a crazy walk before keeling over into oblivion. A tractor takes off into a plowed field to show that life has to go on. Tomatoes growing fat on a vine and furrowed fields. Elsewhere cornstalks have grown to a height of swollen pride and provide green cover for my disappearing self.

Whoever made this bike had my heart in mind that it should be so substantial. With wheels in motion I defy the earth to pull me to it. I shout that I can stay erect in all kinds of weather, and after nailing my fear to the nearest tree ride without hands around the

sharp curve. When I see the car approaching it is too late to move my hands to the grips so another direction can be taken. In such a way do I fly like chaos off the road and tumble into the ditch that awaits me.

The car that drove me from my path has the recognizable feature of Phil with his left arm out the window. In the seat beside him my sister Hannah has shown her face and now she climbs from the car to show her totality, standing over me with Phil as I lie in the ditch.

“He was showing off,” Hannah says. “That’s all he ever does, the little brat, is try to show off. And now look at him. Hah hah hah.”

The lake of shame is wide and deep and lacks any shore to stand on. Show off. Showing off. Those two words obliterate my function on this earth, paralyze me in my resolve to be number 1 for Momma and for all time in her eye. I am naked before them and linger there long after they have left.

When I finally enter the house, Hannah meets me with a smile of pleasure at my disgrace. It is a smile wickedly triumphant and just for me. I receive it as the barrier she has meant to erect, blocking me from all good feeling, and tell her to go to hell though she hasn’t spoken.

“What did you say, you little brat?” Though her voice is full of rage, I can only go where I have been in saying the same thing again so I can live in the opposition that is required. Hannah smacks with her fat tongue clamped between thick lips. Even as I try to cover up, her hand finds my face and so I curse her still again to assert I will never die. Hannah has a hand that is born to hit flesh. “You’re not home now. You don’t have your mother to protect you,” she screams.

From the bowl on the table I grab an apple and throw it hard at her head. Then I throw another one and another one, making contact all the very time. I will kill her into goddamn death. I will drive her down where only the dead can go.

“You,” Phil says, grabbing me hard by the shirt collar. He has the face of a man, hard and betraying in all its features. “You throw another thing in this house and you’ll really catch it. Do you hear me?” He has a finger in my face to show his striking force. “I said, do you hear me?” But I am stuck on my silence that they should do what they want with me and so I lie down on the floor where I can find my resting place.

There is a car ride around the bend where the bicycle used to go. Betty by now has confessed that the men of the railroad did not abduct her or her sister. I am astonished at the world she has taken away with her admission, and how she could so easily discard it when it meant life itself to me. A bumblebee flies in the window and stings me on the finger. Its relationship to me is so personal that it forsakes its very own life. There it lies on the floor, black and yellow and no more.

Naomi has grown big in her belly and Chuck’s voice is a constant quarrel. There are people in his very department at Columbia University who do not see fit to confer on him the respect he deserves. Instead they breathe envy and jealousy and maliciousness with their every word in their purpose of bringing down his towering greatness. Chuck’s eyes are cunning with their own willfulness and his selfishness is insatiable, Momma says. And yet does he show his face to the world with his victim wound gaping so all can bow down to him in his time of trial and tribulation.

Momma holds me to her breast. “Do you know what a condition is, my son? Do you know what it is to be afflicted with such a thing?” And before I can so much as speak, she has released me and gone away, for Momma is living in the bounty of her mission now, the building her continent to which to call the conditioned of the world.

When the baby comes, I stare down at her, laid out on her back on the living room sofa. Her beaming face. Her chubby legs.

“Aren’t you happy to see your little niece, Jeanne, and to be an uncle?” Naomi says. Her big belly is gone now.

“Yes,” I say.

“My husband is a real man. Real men give their wives the gift of motherhood. Are you going to be a real man, Gideon?”

“Sure,” I say.

“You’re going to be a he-man, like my husband, Chuck?”

“Sure. Sure I will.”

“You’re a funny little Svenska pojka, Svenska pojka,” my sister says.

I don’t want to stay with the baby. I don’t want her here and I don’t want her in room 9C3 with Chuck and Naomi. I don’t want her anywhere here on this earth where there is not order.

“Just remember, little Flathead. I can find you anywhere, and my husband can, too.”

Luigi has not gone away. He has not been rescued from my life. When Luke and I go to him, he says, “No mess around with that chair, you sumbitch bums,” pointing to an

armchair that he has newly upholstered with a white fabric. But I sit in the armchair anyway, as if Luigi's words mean nothing, and so he chases me out of his studio and around the basement. By the elevator he catches me. In his hand he holds a frying pan, which he brings down hard on my head, driving me to the ground.

“Sumbitch, I tella you no sitta in the chair. Wassa matta? You sick? You wanna die?”

It is OK to lie on the concrete floor. My head feels cracked, but if I lie still Luigi may not hit me anymore. And now the elevator door has opened, and I hear my sister Naomi's voice. “What is going on here? What have you done to my little brother?”

“What he do to me, lady? Thassa the question.”

“Don't you ever raise a hand to him again. Do you hear me?”

My sister Naomi having words with Luigi on my behalf. I do not understand. I do not. All I have ever known from Naomi is trickery.

The little park has a bronze water trough used by horses before the cars came and had their way, and benches where old people sit and toss bread crumbs to the cooing pigeons. It is a summer evening and I am sitting alone when I see my father in a suit and tie pass by under a stand of plane trees. A smile of deep contentment has come over his face. He moves along as if in a dream that sets him apart from his surroundings. Many times has Momma told me that my father is a walking man and that it is nothing for him to travel home on foot from the midtown restaurant where he works. Though he is my father, it could have consequences if he turned and saw me as well. The sight of him outside the apartment is enough to startle me. What does so even more is the long, thick cigar he puts

to his mouth. I feel I am seeing what I am not supposed to see, and having seen it, I am in turmoil I have no name for.

Mr. Worrell has come to us from the cold of Canada. is big and powerful and silent, and sees the world through thick glasses. He sleeps in his overcoat and causes his roommate to flee for his life on the threat of murder. Week after week the fire alarm sounds, loud and echoing. Tenants flee a compartment that has filled with black smoke and mill on the landing as the wail of fire trucks draws nearer. Soon firemen who have the courage to enter the smoke-filled hallways with their axes and hooks are dealing with the insatiable flames that would, unchecked, lick and incinerate and purify without end. Fires on seven, eleven, nine, and now room 6B3 has been hit, a pile of rags ignited against the door of Miss Helen Houlihan, a surname so heavy with her Irish heritage. She it is, fat Miss Houlihan, whom the hook and ladder men coax from the ledge down their metal steps of mercy. A rumor spreads. The fire is Mr. Worrell's fury for Miss Houlihan spurning his desire. The fire is his merciless revenge.

Where are you, Mr. Worrell? Why do you not tell me the truth of what it is to be indifferent to this structure you would burn so easily? Why do you not tell me how it is that I cannot breathe owing to the excitement you have brought? What is it that you inhabit my dreams, standing on the parapet on the darkest of nights as we stare up at you from Broadway below?

Momma has me descend into the basement. "You, on your long legs, run, run, and turn on the boiler, so we will not have this cold in our bones." Momma says. I mustn't tell Momma that the errand terrifies me, as she will only laugh and laugh. The elevator takes

me down and down again. Because it is Sunday the laundry machines are at rest and Luigi has locked his shop. All I hear is the occasional commotion of the circuit breakers in the elevator room and jump at the sudden flash of electrical blue. There is violence in that complicated room and there are rats scurrying on the wet cement floors in the shop basements to my right. And somewhere down here is Mr. Worrell, waiting patiently for me. Any second he will materialize in the air that shimmers now that the sleeping boiler has come to life. I sit on the steps leading down to the massive cylinder and wait for him.

“I am here for you, Mr. Worrell. I am here to see your face of evil. Show it to me, and show it to me now,” I say. And then I say it and say it and say it again. Louder and louder do I say it to bring the confrontation where it must go. My body is fraught with peril. My nerves are not of steel. The sound of the boiler is the sound of a fiery ocean. It is a roaring and a rushing in my ears. My words become a kind of chant. They take me higher in my own mind. They wake the rats and make them dance.

A small semicircular door is only ten feet away. I have only to open the latch and I am in the alleyway and available for my own freedom. But it may go harder on me if I try to escape. Such action will reveal my true intention of abandoning Mr. Worrell, who has enough fire in him to melt all the snow in Canada. He will see I do not truly love him and ignite the world.

A hand is now on my shoulder, and would speak to me of its intention. The hand shakes me preliminary to its further action. I can feel the hand but close my eyes against its owner. Now do I really scream, but no sound comes out. A second hand has taken hold of my other shoulder. Together the hands work to shake me good and the face of death is shouting words for my ears to hear. Above the roar of the boiler it proclaims its message

of fatality. He will stuff me into it and incinerate me beyond belief. Now are the words coming into my ears from close at hand. They are the words of Momma, having arrived to be heard. She is pulling me to my feet. She is leading me to green pastures. The circuit breakers in the elevator room can spit their blue sparks of electrical fury. They can snap and surprise with all the meanness of the universe, but Momma is there to lead me through the valley of the shadow of death. She has arrived in her robe of white to lead me to my safety. But in the rising elevator do we hear the fire alarm sound and the building shake with Mr. Worrell's outcast fury and the declaration—his—that he does not need the darkness for his flames to dance. This time, as always, is the fire everywhere, in my mind and in my heart. This time does numbness overcome me again. We are past the point of being able to save ourselves. Annihilating forces are too present in the land and the fire trucks of New York City should not mock us with their blaring horns, as Mr. Worrell has truly declared that the bravery of their human cargo is not a match for his wrathful heat.

Momma, it is too late. Turn back the wailing fire trucks. Turn them back now. Do not allow false hope to have its place on our horizon. The flames of iniquity have arrived, and here we must abide, on the street with ashes all around, I shout, but neither she nor anyone can hear.

When the firemen arrive once again in their giant hats and fire-retardant coats, I call them the men of strength that they are. They smash down doors, they break the window glass so it can never stand again, they disappear the smoke so it can be no more. And when the commotion is spent and they lie all about so recuperation can have a chance, I stand over them and tell them the truth, that I was afraid they would be too late

and should not bother, and am afraid now that they are leaving at all that can happen again, so monstrous and insistent are the ways of Mr. Worrell.

“He comes from Canada. He has melted all their snows. Fire is his truth. He will allow nothing to stand in its way,” I say, before Momma shushes me.

The firemen possess the camaraderie of men. They ignore Momma. They speak in sentences that do not tolerate the compromises that women would impose, and the words are spoken from under mustaches that show themselves so very strong. They have braved cold waters to be pulled onto these very shores. I stare and stare from behind where Momma stands.

Mr. Worrell’s glasses need cleaning, his face is full of unshaven neglect, and his hair has been whipped by a wild wind. He alters his gait for no one; his studied slowness is a song of praise for methodical endeavor. The battalion of firemen and fire marshals assembled does not cow him.

“Mr. Worrell, I will follow you to the ends of the earth. To the very ends,” I shout. He turns and stares, seeing right through Momma to me, so that I have to fall down on the carpeted lobby floor from the saturation his look inflicts. And when he has annihilated—yes, annihilated—every living thing with the power of his mind, he walks on by, with no regard for the manmade prison of gossip, speculation, and outright backstabbing that the tongue needs only the prompting of a malicious or misguided heart to perform.

Oh are the fire alarms made to ring. Oh are tenants fled from their lonely rooms in unspoken gratitude for the sense of community his ongoing menace brings. And oh are the forces of goodness brought to bear in trying to halt his demon ways. I kiss Mr. Worrell. I hug him. I sing his numbing terror in the heart of me.

A fire in 11D2. A scorching blaze in 3C3. Smoke to obscure the heavens pouring from 5A3. How much can any one take before the driven man is led away?

Momma doesn't tell me how Mr. Worrell was made to disappear so the wounds to the building could heal. She does not tell me if he vanished in the darkness of the night or in the bright light of day. But this she will tell me, with conviction in her sound: "This is but one tree. There will come a time when the entire forest is ablaze, forever and ever."

The night calls to me. I hear its distinctive voice, saying there is life I must have beyond the walls of the untidy apartment. It tells me to go to the subway and to go to it now and to find a men's room where, at a dirty urinal, I can stand with my sneakered feet on the wet cement floor stinking of pee and disinfectant among the men who likewise position themselves. Go with your longing for them to take you away and be with these men who dawdle endlessly, stroking their big hard things, the voice says, making any other voice impossible.

Columbus Circle. Times Square. Fourteenth Street. I look for my love where I can.

Oh, adventure. Oh, life. It is that same voice that compels me to plead with Momma for money for a grandstand ticket at Yankee Stadium, as the vision of green grass and the dirt infield turned a rich brown by the hosing of the groundskeepers and of men in pinstriped uniforms is too much to resist. A life beyond my own is calling me, and Momma says yes, yes, and I bound for the subway to Ninety-sixth Street, where I catch an uptown train through Harlem to One Hundred Forty-Ninth Street, and soon I am on a

third train that sheds its hiding place for the elevated tracks that bring us in view of the cream-colored walls of the stadium and a patch of outfield grass, and now I am in another world, I am in life, life, the life beyond the tabernacle walls.

But now I am not alone but with my father walking through the Times Square Station to catch the train to Astoria, Queens. He holds my hand in his as we push through the rush hour throng. He has left Jack Dempsey's restaurant to be with me and I with him in a connection that Momma has arranged. Because Momma has spoken. "You must not deny your father anymore and break his heart. It would mean the world to him if you would go and hear him preach," Momma said, asking me to cancel the freedom of my own life.

The Mad Bomber has been here. He lives in the hearts of millions. He places ticky ticky boom boom where people are known to go, so their legs can be blown from their bodies and they can grieve for what was never theirs forever in the first place, the crazy man says. There are juvenile delinquents wandering about, offering oily hair and stiletto knives and raucous tongues. They are black jewels in the underground labyrinth.

My father lets me talk within the confines of my own mind. He does not impose his silence upon me. My father is the Mad Bomber. He is explosive wherever he may go, and I am the only containment policy he will ever know.

Astoria has blocks that go on without end and rows of small buildings. Astoria lets you see the sky. The air is soft and hungry for life. Possibilities for pleasure are intact in each blade of grass. It is spring. The monotony of concrete is not a lifelong threat but a peculiar adventure in the weakening light of day.

We come to a private home, where my father takes me into a garage cleared of cars so folding chairs can stand in the vacated space. Women bring coffee and water from the house next door so the men who have gathered may drink. A podium is wheeled in on a dolly and a picture of the Christ Jesus is tacked to the wall.

Though my father has a voice, it is muted so only the frantic movement of his arms can truly speak. Mortification pours in upon me from the ends of the earth that my father should be so afflicted among the stalwart brethren, the men of substance with thick necks. My shame is that they are enduring my father. He is not part of them. He is alone and he is crying. He cannot stop himself. I hear the words “My dear wife” and “who has been so good to me.”

From the back of the room I stand and sing the Robert Hall clothing store jingle loud and clear and true, as if my voice is carrying American candy to the deprived of the earth. I sing of values going up, up, up and prices going down, down, down. I sing so my father will be seen more fully in the glory of his Robert Hall suit that covers so many of his Armenian bones and allows him to feel spectacular on the earth. I sing standing on a chair so it will be known that I am the Almighty.

There is pandemonium in the courthouse that the garage has now become. If there are witnesses to my execution, they have first to roll up their sleeves and lay their hands upon my head that the torquing action of the Christ Jesus may flow through them and elevate me to a place I have never been. I am at the center of their prayer storm and electrify them not with insult but indifference. They are a shuddering and beseeching nation beset by the stiff-necked ways of their own *people* that such idolatry should

occupy the young. They do not let me sleep, they do not let me cry, but yank me hither and thither while surviving on their middle-age breath.

My father has reached an annihilation factor of ten. It is in his blood. I run through the streets of Astoria, Queens, past the filthy Greeks staring out from their coffee shops. I run into the subway station and mock the turnstile and its impediment purpose by leaping over it. I mock the token booth operator in his stationary vigil. I mock the trains that think they are truly a part of the tunnel when they are only passing through so darkness can return. I mock my father that he should think he can place a hand on me where I have fled.

But now I am mocking no more, for I am in my bed and the fate of my nation is in the balance as my father is poised to strike. He has massed all his troops on my border and a riot of angry sound is coming from his council of war. But Momma is there to block his path with her words of reason. "Hayk, the boy is ailing. He says things he doesn't mean. I will speak with him so this doesn't happen again. You must not hit an afflicted mind." Momma talks with sweetness on her breath and softness in her soul so she can begin to effect the amelioration of his disdain. And yet, how the walls do tremble while even the sheets on my bed petition for the right to vacate the premises rather than abide in such a potential theater of conflict.

None of this has happened. I love my father to the death. To the death.

"You, Gideon, with your long legs. Run for me to the pharmacy to fill this prescription so my night will not be sleepless," Momma says. No one wants for Momma to be sleepless.

We have seen her up late at the dining table reading her Bible. We know the toll it takes on her the next day, not allowing her to be her normal self.

On my way to the pharmacy I stop halfway there to stare into the window of the only store on the long block. Used books on shelves sleep in the dust motes of afternoon light and into the night in this store that is never open and whose name, "Harwyn Books," appears in raised gold letters for all who pass by on this residential street to see. The store stands out as a place of neglected quality where there can be rest from the noises of the world, but when I ask if I can come and sleep there too with the books so old, I hear it said my time will come for living in the shadows where at that moment I long to be.

That a store like this should stand alone and make such inroads on my mind. That it should go back to another time and clearly have its life threatened by the changes that are coming. I want...I want eternity to be the golden glow that lights my life to everything around me. This place has holiness as well as mystery attached. That much must be understood.

This is not a block without its other features. This you must also understand. On the same south side of the street, just before the squat and dark water station on the corner of Amsterdam Avenue, stands a small, narrow fire station, with firemen of strength and a triumphant red fire engine and a fire pole and a Dalmatian. And on the opposite corner stands an apartment building where the party of life is being held. It has modernity and lightness in its golden bricks and casement windows. It is a building that says the sun is shining in all weather.

Under this building stands Ridge's pharmacy in its own solitary importance. Amsterdam Avenue is not Broadway, but it does exist and runs parallel to Broadway and

must not be taken lightly. Right across the street is St. Luke's Hospital and a block south is the brooding presence of St. John the Divine Cathedral. Understand where you are when you speak of this avenue.

I hand the prescription to solemn-faced Mr. Dollops, as gray as the smock he wears over his shirt and tie.

"It will be about ten minutes. Have a seat," Mr. Dollops says, looking down at me sternly through his bifocals.

Have you ever seen a Parker T-ball jotter or an Esterbrook or Schaeffer fountain pen, or smelled blue-black ink in a bottle and wanted to make it your final resting stop? Have you ever wanted to bring order into your life with good penmanship? Have you ever needed accumulation before your starting point could be reached?

Behind the two chairs is a cabinet with sliding glass doors containing these pens. Mr. Dollops being alone in the store, I reach behind me as I sit and begin to inch the glass door open. In the rear I hear Mr. Dollops pecking at the keys of his typewriter in preparing the label for the prescription bottle. My hand is reaching inside the cabinet when I feel a hand grab me by the back of my shirt. Mr. Dollops has come out from behind the counter. He drags me toward the wire-screened front door and tosses me out onto the sidewalk.

'Don't come back here again,' I hear him say, as he tosses the crumpled prescription at me.

I walk slowly back toward Broadway. The shame is strong. I had heard a voice saying no, no, don't touch that glass door, but it was not a voice I could listen to enough to obey. And now I have given Mr. Dollops the opportunity to throw me to the sidewalk,

as if I was dirt, as Momma would say, and as if he could tell, from the moment I entered his store, that I would need watching.

At the Whelans Drug Store at One Hundred Tenth Street, there is nothing I must steal, only what I must get for Momma in this environment of bright, shadowless light. Like Mr. Dollops, Mr. Delfonico takes the prescription, and after filling the amber bottle, pecks at the typewriter keys, applying the pressure needed to make Momma's name come alive on the label.

The apartment is dark, and so I turn on the light to dispel all peril. Momma is there in the sudden brightness. "Did you think I would go away, my foolish son, when my night has to remain sleepless until and unless you arrive?"

"No, Momma, I am here. Do not speak such words. I forbid you."

Momma snatches the bottle and from it takes a pill and swallows it with the glass of water she has poured. Momma is in her robe of white. Momma is with her hair hanging down. Momma is with her bare legs exposed in a shock to my senses that such affliction can be upon the flesh and turn its whiteness veiny blue. I have let Momma down and now she must die and I must die. But Momma doesn't die. Momma survives to emerge into the place of her own returning sweetness. In a soft voice does Momma sing. She sings a church song not of lamentation or of grief. She sings of how he walks with her and talks with her and calls her his very own. This is what Momma sings.

I would tell you that Momma rocks me into my own place of peace. I would tell you that the peace of sleep descends on me right then and there, but the apartment exists outside the bounds of order so my mind cannot be rocked to rest. I take a broom to the

disorder I see all around me, as I see my father often do, so dust and dirt and garbage cannot be on the floor.

“My Svenska pojka,” Momma says, when she is beyond her anger and her singing for the night and all is sweetness once again.

But Momma is not always Momma as I would have her be, and you shouldn't think she is. Tonight she violated my sovereignty by calling me names that are not mine. “Luke, I mean Hannah, I mean Naomi, I mean Rachel, I mean...,” she says, standing with spatula in hand, as the hamburger spits in the frying pan and the Birds-Eye peas and carrots boil in water. Momma must never be given the right to lose me, to make of me an interchangeable thing. “No, no, no,” I say, but still do the names spill from her mouth as if I have nothing to identify me. Momma has showered me with her indifference, and for this I must see the color red and withdraw to my room.

For the longest time does Momma not come knocking, a precious time in which my anger can rejoice even as my ears strain for her very sound. Oh that I can be so very wronged. Oh that I can feed the wound so my anger sings. Oh that a nation can harm itself by the starvation principle on which it rests.

And then I hear her footsteps in the hallway as a neglected dog hears its master. The sound of Momma is a sound made only for me. I am sitting in the bottom bunk when she knocks upon the door. But victory is not mine should I go ahead and answer, only weakness and death.

Momma does not knock twice. She is Momma. She opens the door so her visit can begin.

“Why are you not at the table, my good son?”

Momma’s fatigue is no impediment to her good cheer. But it is for me to bring her into line with the gravity of the situation by making no response.

“Do you not answer me, my son?”

A word will pull the plug on all the power I have stored. I must send Momma away with the awareness of what she has done so she will return and return and return once again and I will not have to die in the cold place she has left me.

‘Why do you treat me this way, my son? What is it that ails you?’

Is there good cheer in her voice now? Are you hearing any such thing? Or are you hearing what punishment can wreak when it is properly applied? Momma must now receive the crushing defeat she deserves so her full attention can be returned to where it properly belongs.

“Leave me alone.” I say those words. I can afford to say them now from the power I have developed.

Momma goes away. Do I hear her chuckle now at all the torment she has brought? Do I?

But it is not a small thing to hurt Momma, not when I know it can be fatal. Now I am still angry but also frightened. Now can I only wait for her return. Now is it only Momma time, the time of pain before I hear her footsteps once again. Now does she come without knocking with a hamburger on Wonder bread on a plate with steaming carrots and peas. To this I must say no until Momma stands there with plate in hand and cries and cries, cries that I have made her feel like dirt beneath my shoes the way that all her children make her feel. Now must I be made to understand what it is to be Momma

with the sorrow and the grief she carries. Now must I throw away my anger and my resistance. Now must I cry too that Momma carries such a burden and, when my tears have dried, eat the food that she has brought for me in the room where for now I exist alone, living once again in sweet harmony with she who brought me here.

Luke has found a girl to be with in a building with an intercom and the shine of cleanliness on One Hundred Fourteenth Street. It is the same building where Edward Macy lives, but neither he nor Johnny Lacy has claimed her for their own. Her name is Alison, and she lives on the strength of her blond hair. Her younger sister is present in a glow of pink pajamas and I am dizzy with the thought of what she means. I don't sit next to her the way that Luke sits with Alison. All I know is that their mother is also present and says they are from the South. When we leave, Momma is on the corner. There on Broadway does Momma weep over the affliction to her that we are that we are out so dangerously late and even as I am pulled into the thought of her perishing does Luke dance on the moon with the happiness he is feeling.

When I go back to the building with the intercom, it is not for Alison or her sister, but for Johnny Donatelli, the super's son. The apartment has a nipping Doberman and drooling boxer that come too close and the stench of human as well as animal filth. Mr. Donatelli has takeout power in both fists and Mrs. Donatelli is hugely fat and both sit devouring a bowl of peanuts.

Johnny Donatelli wears his shirts buttoned at the top and has the proportions of a god to go with the recklessness of his life. He is wiry strong and throws me to the ground to show it. Headlocks and half-nelsons are his calling card, and satisfaction is all his to

pin me. Johnny Donatelli goes to the school of the Catholics, where they hit and hit, and has a father who can hit and hit, but now he flies about in his own exuberance on the streets of New York City, calling out, "Come on, youse guys," to Jerry Jones-Nobleonian and me, and flings the dog shit of New York City upon us with the stick that he has found and laughs and laughs that he should be so fiercely free.

Arnold is also on One Hundred Fourteenth Street. It is a block that has its own building for Negroes. He is a boy with a face of smiling anger, his black skin pulled taut over his hard skull, and walks upon the earth with his white teeth showing in a mouth not shaped for kindness. Arnold smiles that he has no breakfast. He smiles that toothpaste is a rarity and sisters are an abundance and that space is not to be found in the single room the family has come to occupy. When he walks it is upon the particulars of his own Negro-ness in an attitude of mocking apartness he has been given, as if he is but a shadow upon a world he has no investment in. He has no play in him, as when he says, "Don't be playing with me," and shows indifference to the wind and all the elements that would seek to nourish or afflict him.

No one knows why Arnold should have the power to command Johnny Donatelli to stand to his attention with his back to him or why Johnny Donatelli would allow Arnold to jab his knuckles into his spine over and over so Johnny Donatelli has to fall slowly to the ground with no ability to get back up. No one knows why the smile of hate should only grow in the process Arnold has initiated. All you should know is that it is there and ready for you, too, in the fear of inevitability that he spreads from his position of being a Negro person on the ground of New York City. Because Arnold has no never

mind in regard to the minority that he is. He knows only the power he is so adamantly imposing.

Now when word comes to Raymond Donatelli, the older brother of Johnny Donatelli, of his fallen sibling, Raymond Donatelli has no choice but to go down the hill to the building of the Negroes and call out to them in his cold rage, and they call back to him, and the noise of war is heard all around, the street weaponry of baseball bats and flashing knives and broken bottles brought to bear by the Negroes on Raymond Donatelli that he should no more be on this earth. But Raymond Donatelli breaks the faces of the Negroes as they come and they break his and over and over is this act repeated. To the windows overlooking the street are apartment dwellers drawn to bear witness, with white people afraid for their very lives while the Negroes exult in the paradise of revenge they are seeking, as the wail of police cars is heard in the distance.

And so it is for me to know dread, a dread that enters my bones to stay for easy recall, at what it is that people can do and the physical affliction that they can cause, and fall in love with Raymond and Johnny Donatelli and all aspects of their Italian nation, while shunning the smiling face of Arnold even as it seeps into my own.

In the wilting blaze of summer, when the Negro boys of Harlem arrive on our block with their bicycle caravans, riding without hands and facing backward on their seats or standing on their heads on those very same seats, when, that is, they come in the full measure of their furious need for expression, then must I acknowledge a power that is not my own that they should make merry in the moment they are living, and be spellbound by the arsenal of combative freedom that they express in reuniting with their kin in the buildings for the Negroes that have been established on my block.

Luke has put Wildroot on his hair to command how it stands on his head and walks cocky but innocent with a garrison belt buckled on the side. Once a week he goes to Ziggy Brothers, down on Ninety-ninth Street and Broadway, where big window signs in orange and red scream out the sale that never ends. He buys paisley shirts and striped shirts and flips the short sleeves up so muscle can be shown to exist. Luke is my brother, bigger in his dimensions and in forward motion with the things that he must get.

“His foolishness never ends,” Momma says, that Luke should not listen to her but go his own way into the world he wants. “You are my good son,” Momma says to me. “You are not afraid of a little dirt. You are not afraid to wear second-hand clothes,” meaning the shirts that Luke discards. Momma pulls me close to her with the approval she can give.

The winter snow makes the Negro boys of New York City fewer but not none on the street where I live. When we pass two of them as we are turning onto Broadway, and they stop and then follow us, I cannot move, I cannot speak, in the face of the lethal instruments of crushing justice headed back our way. They are strong in their bodies and their minds, needing no food to give them muscle nor toothpaste for their teeth to shine so white.

“Why you be calling me a nigger just now?” the bigger one says. He addresses himself solely to Luke, who does not know to move cautiously within the lines of their investigation, and answers instead with the freedom the earth has given him.

“I didn’t call you anything,” Luke says, sounding the aggrieved protest of the unjustly accused. Luke does not know about smallness. He does not know how to stay low to the ground when so many signals for death are waiting for him on the streets of New York City.

“You be calling my friend Butch a liar?” the other says. “White boy be calling us liars?” His words have summoned anger to his face and now there is the punch and then the next, sending Luke down into the snow that turns so red from his bleeding nose. Do I do something? Do I transfix them with my stare? Do I impose a strength that is not there? Or do I live forever in the cowardice of my ways that does not allow me to come to the aid of my fallen brother? You know the answer, as my brother knows the answer. Not one finger do I raise. Not one single finger. Instead I pray that silence will be the answer to their angry ways.

Nowhere is it written that a brother can keep his guilt to himself. When another Negro boy walks alone on the other side of the street, headed for the building that will have him, do I just watch or do I make a snowball, a big soft round one, and lob it gently in his direction far enough ahead that it will surely miss and he will see the playfulness of my intention so that anger will not have to be a part of who he is with me? But when he sees what I have done, he picks up a small thin piece of board, and with it does he come slowly, methodically toward me, so that I can only wait to receive him, and when I would explain, does he smash me in the face with the board and send me down into the snow where Luke had been, and then does he toss the board on top of me, as if the word *play* is

not a part of his speech, except to say, “Don’t be playing with me. I’m not playing, not playing, not playing.”

The pain is there in great abundance, but it does not have the staying power of the image of him focused on his own intention with the board held at his side and the patience that he showed as if the board and my face had been ordained to meet and so haste had no necessity of being in the picture.

You might think we were destined to be in each other’s life forever, and that we would meet and meet on the streets of New York City, and that finally, and in full proof of love’s call, that he would cross from his side to mine or vice versa and we would declare a bond, as would Luke and his assailants, but territorial enclaves get established, parts of the city get sectioned off by the will of those who occupy them. There are those whose anger is born of their deprivation on seeing the hegemony of white faces in the land of plenty when they have none so that, even when they are on the grounds of whiteness, they seek to establish their own canceling hegemony in an act of will and courage and flaming rage in defiance of their numbers, knowing what it is to be held down and who the culprit truly is affirming their lack of worth. All this is part of what it means to live in New York City, and don’t be here if you don’t understand or stay until you do.

The men of the tabernacle—some—have their own cars, and now they are driving away from our house of worship in a long procession. When I turn in the back seat, I see that Momma has already begun to walk away. Soon we are on the Henry Hudson Parkway, going north to the George Washington Bridge. Then we are on the Palisades Parkway.

Then we are going and going to the Catskill Mountains, where Momma says we will have the fresh air of the country. The man who drives has rolled down his window and rests his left arm in the frame. Though he is in the front seat, he fills the whole car.

Hours later we come to a town called Phoenicia, with tall trees along the main street. Then we turn off a small road and come some miles later to a smaller town called Lanesville. It has a gas station and a general store and a post office and nothing more.

At the turnoff our car rumbles across a small bridge spanning a creek and climbs a rutted dirt road. In a circular driveway we get out and face a white clapboard main house with a peaked roof. Then I am led down a flagstone path to a small cabin for boys. The screen door bangs closed each time it is opened.

My room is at the back of the cabin, with a window that looks out on a field, where heavysset women are taking down the wash from clothelines and folding it in baskets. The room smells of mildew.

That evening, in the driveway, sits a lone car, a Lincoln Continental, with whitewall tires. The men of the tabernacle have all gone back to the city. We gather in the main house, where at a long table we are given a meal of grains and thick slabs of meat. A woman with her gray hair in a bun and a worried Jesus face moves sadly among us, as if all alone except for her Jesus, on whom she calls to tame the wild frontiers of her mind and to give her the warmth she needs in the cold of this world.

Pastor Veselka stands at the head of the table and says grace. He is a stump of a man. Though it is mean to say, little pig eyes blaze in his pasty face, and on his head sits an orange toupee.

“We have suffered the little children to come unto us, dear Jesus, and we pray in your name that they will be grateful for the gift that we have given them.” In this way does Pastor Chernenko pray, his words like hot grease spitting from a frying pan.

The smell and the sight of the food leave me unable to eat. I am grateful for the bread and butter, and the two glasses of milk I drink. Some of the grains and meat I place on a napkin and hide between my feet under the table. As for the rest, I spread it as thin as possible on the plate.

“You are skin and bones,” the sad-eyed woman says. “Underweight.” She runs her finger up and down my ribcage. “Like a washing board,” she says.

Her words knock me down. They take away my ability to speak. Hot shame floods me. *Underweight*. The word explodes in my mind.

Outside two boys play a game of stretch, their legs moving farther and farther apart with each throw of the jackknife into the turf.

Facing the main house is a tiny shack with a window that opens on a counter, where Pastor Chernenko sets boxes of candy: Goldberg’s Peanut Chews in red and black wrappers; Milky Ways; Mars Bars; Necco Wafers, Sugar Daddies with yellow wrappers brighter than the sun; Good n’ Plenty; Tootsie Rolls.

“Single file, children, single file. And have your money ready to purchase these delicious candies,” Pastor Chernenko says.

That evening we are called to the tabernacle, a white structure with aluminum siding. On a stage raised a foot off the dirt floor Pastor Chernenko preaches, loosening his tie as he warms up. The angry splatter of words we heard at the dinner table are now a five-alarm fire. Pastor Chernenko is ablaze in the cool mountain air, full of holy smoke..

The adults are among us in the congregation, the thick-bodied women I saw in the field and the sad-eyed woman who served us dinner and the counselor for the boys, Bob Pellalugra, and his wife with the crazy name Hosanna for the girls. Bob Pellalugra doesn't look crazy but he does look mean, as if he wants to hit someone and can hardly wait. He wears his hair in a flat top, every strand standing at attention.

When he summons us to the prayer rail at the end of the evening, beseeching us to give ourselves to the Lord, Vera and Luke heed his call, as do the other children. But I cannot go. Pastor Chernenko does not have my love. He does not have my heart. I can't say why.

That night I pee in my bed. The wet sheets soon become a torment. Freezing, I climb in with Luke, waking him as I do. "Jesus Christ," Luke says, but does not kick me out.

In the morning we are woken by the loud voice of Bob Pellalugra booming in the hall. "Rise and shine, everyone. Rise and shine." We hear the doors of the other rooms bang open, and his heavy footsteps draw closer. Now Bob Pellalugra has thrown open our door as well. "Up, up. Christ doesn't like lazybones Did you hear me? I said up." Bob Pellalugra pulls the covers off us. "Say, why are you two in the same bed? Did one of you piss your bed? Is that it?" Bob Pellalugra inspects my bed and sees the wet sheets. "For crying out loud. Which one of you did this?" Bob Pellalugra's face has gone red. The veins in his thick neck are like cords.

"We don't know," I say.

“You don’t know? You don’t know? Well, I know, Squirt. You pissed your bed and then climbed in with your brother. You’re not at home now. Mommy isn’t here to clean up after you. Don’t do that again. You hear me?”

“Yes,” I say.

An ache of longing is growing in me for Momma. I can’t speak. I can’t stand. I can only lie curled up on the freshly made bed. Momma must come for me. Her softness must be mine again to lose myself in. I must have her warm understanding so my life can be my own once more. Everything is the hardness of rocks at this camp. Momma is the sun coming through the window and warming my back and neck. But I must have her as herself, not as the sun. I must. Momma, I see you walking up the winding road past the main house and the canteen shack and to my cabin to take me home.

Eddie Sanchez and his cousin Felipe Gomez are at the camp. They call me Flathead and Squarehead. I throw rocks at them as they run away laughing. Luke says to me, “Are you crazy? Are you? You could kill them with those rocks.” I do not tell Luke what I know, that they are trying to slay me with the names that come from their laughing mouths.

In the evening the tabernacle is on fire again with the smoking words of Pastor Chernenko. Weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth are happening at the prayer rail afterward. Eddie Sanchez and Felipe Gomez come to me, their eyes glistening with tears. “We did you wrong when we should have done you right,” Eddie Sanchez says. “We will never call you Flathead or Squarehead again,” Felipe Gomez says. Their apology is a burden too great. I cannot be responsible for such fragile goodness. I smile and leave their words right there in the night air as I run away.

During the day we go down to the creek and wade gingerly in the shallow water. The rocky bottom can be hard to stand on. And there is a field nearby where we can run, but the yellow jackets get angry and sting us. And there is the plaster mold of Jesus with his disciples at the last supper, over which I pour brown paint. Ruth Pellalugra, the wife of Bob Pellalugra, says, "I've got your number," as if she has reached in and seen every bad thing about me. She looks older than her husband. It is those thick glasses she wears.

In the evening a chorus of crickets forms in the dark. "Ri-bit. Ri-bit." On into the night we hear their sound. And we have a sound of our own, our voices rising in song in the tabernacle when Pastor Chernenko is not ranting. A counselor named Dawn sings "Rescue the perishing, care for the dying/Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave/ Weep o'er the erring one, lift up the fallen/ Tell them of Jesus, the mighty to save/Rescue the perishing, care for the dying/Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save." She is young and pretty and sings with joy in her face and has no need of the hymnal and never have I loved anyone the way I love Dawn. Not Alison Pauley. Not anyone.

But the next day she is gone. Someone says she has fallen and is lost and cannot be with us anymore because she has been with a man in the night. It is unbearable to think of her as perishing without any hope of rescue. I don't know how to live with this dark cloud.

Now there is trouble everywhere. Bob Pellalugra has called a council of the boys and girls and stands in the middle of the ring they have formed around him. He holds me by the neck of my shirt. "Do we all know the kind of filth that he has gone and done?" Bob Pellalugra asks. "Well, do we? How about it, Eddie? Do you know?"

“He went and raised the window of the girls’ bathroom and peeked in,” Eddie says.

“He has done filth. That is what he has done. And filth cannot be with us. Go to your room now, Filth,” Bob Pellalugra says.

But there are others who must stand in the circle of judgment as well, if not this day, then the next. Now Bob Pellalugra holds Peanuts Luzinski by the scruff of the neck with one hand. “Do you think Jesus wants filth?” he says to us. “Or does Jesus want us cleaner than snow? Are these underpants cleaner than snow, children?” With his other hand Bob Pellalugra holds Peanuts Luzinski’s white underpants away from him by two fingers. The stained brown underpants send a shiver of revulsion through me.

“Cleaner than snow,” the children answer back.

“Filth, do you think the Lord wants me and my wife to spend whole days scrubbing the filth from your underwear on a washboard? Is that the Lord’s work? Go to your room and think about your filth and don’t come out until you’ve thought real hard.”

Peanuts is small. He’s like a chipmunk. You have to listen closely to hear what he is saying, when he talks at all. His face is fixed in a permanent half-smile that may not be a smile at all. We can see that he is crying as he walks with his head down back to the cabin.

Now when the children and adults are at the prayer rail after the sermon, I go down to the basement of the main house and enter the dark kitchen through the screen door. With my flashlight on, I find the boxes of candy. Oh, Milky Way. Oh, Mars Bar. Oh, Tootsie Roll heaven. In the meadow I sit under the half moon eating my take, savoring each bite. Fireflies appear as glowing specks of light in the night air. A raccoon is messing about in

the rusted oil drum that serves as a garbage can. From above come the cries and shouts of the gathered in the tabernacle.

On waking I watch as Angel and Clementino, two older boys, strip the bark from the sapling that stands right outside my window. The long blades of their Bowie knives gleam in the sun as the peelings pile up at their feet. Soon the trunk is smooth as a bone and sticky with sap. They have stripped the tree because they felt like it. The camp girls look on, while behind them, in the meadow, the old women tending to the laundry shake their heads.

Pastor Chernenko is beside himself when he finds out. He wags a finger in the faces of Angel and Clementino, who tower over him with their lean and strong bodies. "I should send you both home for such destructiveness. Do you not know the meaning of life, that a tree is a living thing? Do you not know that I planted that tree so it would grow and give the cabin some shade? Do you not know that the whole world has been a party to destruction and we must not be a part of that if we are to be its saviors? You must both go to your room while I decide what to do about this," red-faced Pastor Chernenko says.

The children plead with Pastor Chernenko not to send Angel and Clemeinto home. And I would be sad to see them go, too, though I am also sad about the tree, which will now have to die, and painfully, like a man skinned alive. And what will happen in twenty years? Will no trees be left? Will they be gone, along with the railroads, without which I cannot live?

There was a railroad running through the Catskill Mountains, but now they have come and taken away the tracks and the ties so only the roadbed is left. They went and took it away before I could see the trains moseying along the ridge above the cabin and

the main house and the tabernacle in the dark of night, the light of the engine shining on the trees. Because the good is always taken away from you before you arrive or just after you have arrived and even had a chance to think of it as good. There is some disappearing machine going on—disappearing this, disappearing that—and it makes me mad.

Angel and Clementino are mad, too. “I don’t want that man talking bad to me the way he do,” Puerto Rican Angel says. “He don’t be making a good life for himself talking bad to a Puerto Rican.” We are in the night now, after the service and the prayer rail. Angel’s words take him out of the cabin, Clementino following behind and the spring door slamming shut after them.

“Ooh, there’s going to be trouble now. Someone’s going to get killed,” Peanuts squeals, holding his hands together. There is happiness or just crazy excitement in his voice and freckled face as Angel and Clementino disappear in the darkness in the direction of the ridge. When they return, Angel says he has beaten a porcupine to death with his garrison belt. Quills are still stuck in his belt to prove it. “The porcupine was messing with me,” Angel says. “It showed no respect.”

Angel and Clementino are gods. They do things no one else can do.

Pastor Chernenko does not send them home the next day. He says to them, “I forgive you for your wickedness.”

During nap time I say to Peanuts, “Peanuts, let’s go exploring.”

“But we’re not supposed to,” Peanuts says. “That would be wickedness,” he whispers, as we ease out the spring door and down the hill toward a white house that has been sitting unused, weeds growing high and wildflowers all around it. Inside, the rooms are bare. A chandelier dangles from the ceiling fixture. We climb the stairs. An old iron

bed has been left behind. Dust motes float in the warm afternoon air. I begin to laugh. Peanuts begins to laugh, too. It is helpless laughter, the kind that buckles our knees and doubles us over. Peanuts staggers over toward the window, and uses the wall for support. But suddenly, he isn't laughing. "Gideon, Bob is standing on the cabin porch. He's starting to come down this way."

Now I am not laughing either. Peanuts bolts down the stairs, and I follow after. Bob will block us from getting out the front door if we don't move quickly enough. He mustn't trap us inside. Even in my terror there is a moment of clarity when, as I pass a piece of hanging wallpaper, I have the choice to leave it alone but instead reach and grab hold as I continue my downward path, unable to resist giving the wallpaper the yank it deserves.

Our flight path takes us out the back door. "He's here. He's here," Peanuts whispers. "And he's going to kill us." In fact loud footsteps sounding on the bare wood floor prompt us to move away in the high grass and circle around to the cabin. Luke is snoozing in our room when I return and slip into bed.

"Everyone go to the dining hall immediately. Do you hear me? Immediately." Sometime later Bob Pellalugra is calling to us from the hallway as he pounds on the doors. But at least he is not calling only to me.

In the dining hall Pastor Chernenko is waiting for us. "Children, children. Be seated," he says, and paces back and forth among us, his hands behind him, as he does. "My good, good children," he goes on, after a while. Luke and Vera sit across from me. They look so innocent. All the children do, even Angel and Clementino, whom Pastor

Chernenko decided not to send home. I run my hand along the knotty wood surface of the table, feeling the nicks.

“Children, you are my good children, are you not? Say to me, ‘We are your good children.’”

“We are your good children,” the chorus comes back.

“Of course you are my good children. I needn’t even ask. I *know* you are my good children. How do I know? Because you love Jesus. Yes, my children, you love the Lord. And how do you suppose I know you love the Lord? I will tell you, my children, how I know. I know because you seek the Lord. Each night you cry out for the Lord at the prayer rail in our little tabernacle. That is how I know. I see your beautiful, tear-streaked faces, and know that the Lord is working in you and that you are being washed in the blood of the Lamb. I see Eddie and Felipe, and I see little Alma, and it does my heart good.”

Alma is the prayer girl. No one prays as fervently or as loud as she does. And Eddie and Felipe have only called me Flathead once since they promised not to, and the next day gnashed their teeth in front of me that they had backslid that one time.

“But there is one I don’t see at the prayer rail. Not once have I seen him there. Do any of you know of whom I speak? Do you know, Alma?” When Alma shakes her head, Pastor Chernenko strokes her cheek, smiles, and continues down the line. He is so very soft and gentle with the children. He repeats the question to Eddie and Felipe and others, before coming to Peanuts. “Peanuts. Such a nice name. do you know who it is that is never seen at the prayer rail?”

“Aw, gee,” Peanuts says, and makes little snuffling sounds.

“Tell us, Peanuts. Be the good boy that you are and say who it is we do not see at the prayer rail.” Pastor Chernenko has cupped the back of Peanuts’s head in his chubby hand.

Peanuts looks over at me and then looks away.

“Yes, that is the one, Peanuts, the one you were just looking at. Our boy of no faith, who cannot bring himself to the prayer rail even once. Now tell us, Peanuts, the way in which he led you astray and into sin this afternoon. Don’t be afraid.”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? You don’t know it is a sin to destroy property, that it is not Christian and God will not love you for it? You do not know it is a sin to tear wallpaper?”

“I don’t know what I know,” Peanuts whimpers.

“You know, Peanuts. Of course you know. You are my good boy, at the prayer rail every evening. Tell us who ripped the wallpaper.”

“Gideon ripped the wallpaper.”

“And why did he rip the wallpaper?”

“He didn’t mean to.”

“The wallpaper just happened to come into his hand? No, you know better. It is because this boy is destructive. It is because he throws stone and breaks windows time after time. It is because this boy is ungrateful.” And it is true that I throw stones. Just the other day Pastor Chernenko sent me to my room for throwing a stone at a tree even as I stood only a foot from him. And this after sending me to my room two days before for the same thing.

And so Pastor Chernenko turns to me, as does everyone in the dining hall, and I am in the place where I have been before with Sister Mary Christabel and Bob Pellalugra. The shame place, where I must stand trial. “Do you not love the Lord?” Pastor Chernenko asks.

“I don’t know the Lord,” I say.

“Don’t you want to get to know the Lord?”

“I want to go home.”

“The Lord is your home. That is why you must come to the prayer rail, as the other children do. Because if you come to the prayer rail, then you will have no need to go to homes that are not your own. You will not have the destructive urge to do harm to property that is not your own. Do you understand what I am saying?” Pastor Chernenko had been pacing up and down the dining hall as he spoke, but now he stands directly in front of me, his round face flushed and slick with sweat.

“Maybe,” I say.

“Maybe? The boy says maybe? What have I been telling you in that tabernacle all these nights?”

“I don’t know.”

“Children, I need for you to leave now. I must be alone with this boy.”

As the dining hall empties, I see Vera. She looks disapproving, as if she too sees that I have been bad. Better to be beaten with the others in the room, as I dread being alone with Pastor Chernenko. But he gets right down to business. He gives my ear the Bob Pellalugra twist, and yes, he has his tongue between his lips, though his lips are thin, not thick, like Hannah’s, and his eyes squint. Just as my tears are about to come, he lets go and stands back, heaving from his exertion.

“I will take the devil from you. I will beat you so he flees the premises. In the name of the father, the son, and the holy ghost...” Pastor Chernenko stomps on my sneakered foot with the heel of his leather shoe, causing me to howl and drop to the floor.

“I’m sending you home. You’re trash and we don’t need trash here at our camp. Now go to your room. Go, I say. Get up. Get up now.” He pulls me up with his hands under my armpits, but I drop to the floor again like a sack. He lifts me once again and this time I hobble away.

The boys and girls are milling outside. “Ooh, you really got it,” Peanuts says.

“Shut up, Peanuts,” I say.

Momma, you must come for me. The food is unbelievably stinky and I have pain all the time that you are not here. There is a screaming in my chest for you that will not stop.

I had begun my letter to Momma, but now there is no need to finish it, as I will be going to Momma and she needn’t come for me. But then Pastor Chernenko comes to my room, as if I am his life’s work and he can’t be finished with me. Sometimes he is on fire for the Lord, but now he is on fire just for me. “If there is one more incident, just one. No one destroys my property. No one.”

When he goes away, Bob Pellalugra comes to my room. “We’re going to make a man in Christ of you. A man in Christ,” Bob Pellalugra says. In the morning my foot is still sore, but by evening I am once again outside. While waiting for the supper bell to ring, I stand to the side of the main house, pick up a flat piece of shale, and throw it sidearm. My target is the gnarled bark of an apple tree, but the shale curves wide of the trunk and down the hill toward the dry pond.

Pastor Chernenko and Bob Pellalugra have seen me toss the rock, but outside the main house Alma, the devoted prayer girl, needs their attention. She has cried out, her arms spread and her tear-streaked face raised to the sky, “They are burning. They are all burning. My family is burning.” Pastor Chernenko and Bob Pellalugra and his wife June (**check this**) and many of the children are now forming a circle around the weeping and wailing Alma, but she is beyond any comfort they can give.

“Call a fire truck. Can someone not call a fire truck? Hurry. Run to the phone,” I shout from outside the circle. But my words mean nothing, nothing. How can they be so stupid as to not call for the fire engines if Alma’s family is being burnt to death, as where else can such a fire be raging but in the building back in New York City where they live?

What is wrong with the fire department that the trucks are not coming? Does no one see that the entire tenement is ablaze, with flames shooting out the windows? Oh, the heat of those flames. But then, what is the use of calling the fire trucks? They will race and race in their commotion way through the streets, the big hook and ladder engine and the smaller trucks, but they will be too late, too late, as everyone is always too late. And now the fire will spread to Momma. Flames will engulf her too, and if it is not flames, then there will be violence that will come to her, and I don’t want to be there to see it, ever.

Better to run away because the city is too dangerous and the building that Momma and Auntie Eve manage is too chaotic and there is no hope of order. Let me just bolt into the woods until the fire is spent because I cannot stand the prayer girl Alma’s screams. But it won’t do to leave the fire engines in the firehouse. No, they have to make the commotion run even though there is no hope because that is what people do.

Up I run to the ridge, where Angel took his belt to the porcupine. There I

sit on a log, looking down through the trees at the circle obscuring Alma from my sight, waiting for her cries to cease and for word that all hope of saving her family has gone and that their flesh has been burned from their charred bones, because only with death is there no hope and, best of all, no anxiety about trying to get there in time to save Momma.

Boris Kirilov sings “Love Me Tender.” He says Elvis Presley made him do it. He lives in a big apartment in a building that overlooks dangerous Morningside Park in an area close to where Harlem stands. A women’s hospital is nearby and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, too. Down on the street the Number 4 bus runs its careful route along One Hundred Tenth Street past Boris’s building, before turning down royal Fifth Avenue and gardens that are holy and the City Museum that is holy and all the buildings that house the greatest wealth of the nation.

Boris’s father left everything behind in the Soviet Union. Now he has to stand alone in the apartment without a wife, as Boris has to stand alone without a mother. Boris’s father is an artist in the grayness of his years, with only his canvases to protect him, while Boris wears his blond hair very long and out of keeping with the mandate of crewcut America. The apartment has a Russian coldness to it. I am standing where I have never stood before, and at an angle to the building where I live. An elevator rose me to this apartment. It had an operator who pushed the gate closed and sat on a stool as he pulled the lever that gave the elevator the power to rise. The elevator had a smell. It was of something old and forgotten, of toothless old men saturated with wisdom they are too weary to share.

Luke does not love Boris, but stands with him as a classmate should. Luke can open himself to the life of the school. He does not run from it, even if he has the poverty of his own intentions. The girls like Luke. They send him through the sky with the affection they are showing. And the boys congregate around him, drawn by the vulnerable openness of his ways. There is Robert Montaverdi, with the skinny neck and bulging eyes. There is Barney Blair, whose face holds its own in any circle because of England from which he came. There are so many who place Luke in their embrace that he must go back and be with them while maintaining indifference to his failing grades.

Boris has a need to define himself without setting his hair on fire. It is America and he knows not to be a sitting duck. Whitey. The name he gives himself goes with his white chinos and T-shirt, with only his garrison belt reserved for blackness. Now, with his pompadour in place and Elvis in his head, he can take the stance his mind is calling for. "If you're looking for trouble..." he sings within earshot of a cluster of Negro boys of New York City, who have no never mind for the whiteness of Whitey or his Elvis Presley hair or the deterrence he would create with his garrison belt. They are on him with marauding intensity. They inflict him with wounds so his outfit is saturated with red. They swarm over the hours and days of his life, and turn the summer into a season of delirious expression of their wrath. They drag us from the shops where we cower and the beds where we hide. They are in all the secret passageways and the molecules of air. One must feel deeply the power that they bring and never set foot on their third rail again.

To the north there is paradise on a street called LaSalle, where Claremont Avenue meets its end past the high walls of Cherry Park. The names Serge and Bosco and Terry

Branigan attach to faces with a legendary toughness far in advance of anything my block knows, except for Frenchie the Algerian. I hear street corner harmonizing, I see them smoke and spit and spit and smoke. I hear them call up for Carol to come on down to the stoop where they sit. I hear the words *Freight Kings* and of the boxcar they broke into and of merchandise they stole from it and how someone ratted out someone else when the railroad dicks caught and questioned him so a baseball bat had to be taken to his head as a lesson to never rat out anyone again. But increasingly I hear the fear that is now upon me that this is a block that shouts its pain and lives upon its fire escapes and washes its cobblestone streets with blood and that Luke and I have strayed too far.

Elvis Presley is not white or Negro with his pursed lips and leg shakes and mountain of black hair. Elvis Presley belongs to his own nation, existing outside of school and every structure but his own. Elvis Presley sings bebopaloola and the word has vibrational power out of the echo chamber from which it comes, sending shivers of longing and excitement through every part of who you are. Elvis Presley sings “Love Me Tender” and you have to go down into the valley where he has plunged you in bondage to his song.

Now when Luke walks the street his hair is bound by the Wildroot hair cream he employs. The white lotion has a smell all its own and affirms his Elvis Presley worth.

When I have not been to the barber for too long, Momma says again that I have hair that belongs on a girl. “My Svenska pojka,” she says with a laugh in her voice that means I am not Luke, who is strong in all his features. Momma says I am to maintain the appearance of American-ness and that curly hair on a boy is a violation of what America stands for and must be straightened now.

The bathroom has a door that locks and towels that smell sour and a bottle of Wildroot that promises victory over kinks. I apply a gob to my hair and work it in with my fingers so I can have the even application of its power. If a little is good, more is better. Soon my head is greasy and glistening, but I am not Luke with his wavy pompadour or Johnny Lacy at school with his hair neatly parted. My head is an oil slick with streaks of whiteness.

When Luke sees me, he laughs and laughs in triumph that I try and fail to be like him, but Momma comes to my aid and claims me for her own. “You leave my little Svenska pojka alone. He is my very own Svenska pojka,” Momma says.

Sammy Rawson’s handsome face and straight brown hair parted neatly on the side and his American name qualify him for Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy, but instead he has come to me in the fifth grade with his lonely boy look. Sammy Rawson has heard from Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy that I try to steal pens from the neighborhood stores and says he wants to do some stealing, too.

The Columbia University bookstore is on One Hundred Fifteenth Street and Broadway, just south of the mall. There are pens in glass cases, shelves stacked with stationery and notebooks, and book covers for all the Ivy League colleges. And there is another such bookstore belonging to Teacher’s College at One Hundred Twentieth Street and Amsterdam Avenue. But there are too many watchful eyes to steal anything from either store, and so Tommy takes me to his home, a suite of rooms in Butler Hall, a university-owned residence near Morningside Park. He has a silver-haired grandmother who sits in an upholstered chair sipping tea and parents who are not to be found. He has

been living with her for a year, he says. Some kind of sadness sits in the room with us that Sammy should be alone with his grandmother like this. Sammy says as much with his eyes before I leave.

Because it is another summer, Momma says enough is enough. Luke and I must not abide the filth of New York City for another moment but ride north into the country where the air can have a chance to be normal. Momma packs old suitcases with our clothes and hails a taxi and makes it her own, as there is no time for the subways of New York City on this day. Momma tells the driver there must be no foolishness and to hurry us to Grand Central Station. The driver is happy to do what he can for Momma.

Momma accompanies us onto the train but steps off before it goes into motion. We leave her nothing but the train's vanishing red lights as she stands on the platform watching it slide into the darkness of the tunnel, because a train is not for staying still forever. And it is not for staying in a tunnel forever either. When we break free of darkness and light is on the day, America is not so suddenly and so very loudly singing. In row after row of dilapidated buildings, men and women fix our metal caravan with unsmiling stares while remaining faithful to the motionlessness of their own existence, prisoners of heat and dirt and the crushing weight of filthy streets. Saying to us, run on your diesel-powered railroad trains to where the trees and babbling brooks await you, but you have seen us and we have seen you and payback is coming. Then the streets of dirt and commotion fall away and green growth is increasingly seen and houses privately owned are soon featured in the landscape to the rhythm of the steel wheels, with Momma's face on everything.

A ramp leads us to a big room with a Ping Pong table, natural light coming in through its one window. Beyond this big room is a small room in which we are allowed to stay in a narrow corridor that does not end.

The morning starts with dew on the grass and on the windshields and bodies of the cars. From somewhere come the energetic bugle blasts of reveille. The flag is raised and the pledge of allegiance is said. We are in New York State, but I don't know where. Something called Pine Acres, and without a railroad track in sight.

A room looks down from the main house to the curving driveway. The room has a screened window. Stan Musial has hit a home run over the right field wall at Ebbets Field. Someone says it was on the TV. A light of life comes into me, and with it a terrible ache. I am not in Brooklyn. I am not in the room. I am under the sun in an afternoon without end. Someday I will get to that room where Brooklyn and the world are being seen.

Somewhere there is a paved road. A car drives along it. Someone shouts out "Buick." "Chrysler," another one says, as the cars pass. But there is no violence, none whatsoever. The road has a shoulder we can walk along. No cars need to hit us where we are. The Buick and the Chrysler are far away even when they are near. The crunch of gravel is deafening. That gravel is ours for taking, should we wish to.

In a big meadow are we told to play badminton. The birdie sings when we hit it with our rackets.

A boy named Derwood has arrived. He is chunky in his body and has big teeth. He is neither black nor white but something in between, like Jerry Jones-Nobleonian

without the spots. A girl named Benliss plays with Derwood all day long. "I'm going to make a man of him," she says. They too are in the corridor, in a room I do not visit.

Joe is a part of the camp and in his teenage years. He is big in his body and says he has the features of Christ. He is a counselor for those with rooms in the corridor. From somewhere his two much younger brothers have appeared. I don't know anything but to stay away from them, as there is a wall of painful coldness between us. Then one of the brothers takes me into his warmth. He puts his arm around me by the Ping Pong table and walks with me into the corridor.

"You don't like my brother, do you?"

"Yes," I say, rushing blindly into the confiding warmth he is providing.

But his brothers are behind the corridor door, and now are free to emerge in order to do the violence to my person that Joe's Judas move has invited. They knock me to the ground. They beat and kick me for the crime I have committed and run away laughing at their victory.

Then Joe wedges a chair between our door and the opposite wall in the corridor so we cannot leave our room. And the heavy screen over our window keeps us sealed in.

When it comes that we can loosen the position of the chair against our door and secure our freedom from our own premises, then do we go forth and hit Joe and his brothers in their chest and eye and bring them down.

This is a lie. Completely. We hit no one but ourselves. It is Luke's mouth. He does something with it. In opening and closing his mouth he makes a sound that is wet in my ears and that tells me he has gone too far and is trying to annoy me. And so I hit and hit and hit in a frenzy of rage until he pins me to floor.

Oh Momma, why do you send us where you are not?

Johnny Andrews is waiting for us outside his building, next door to Langley Farmer's house of order. He lives on the second floor in an apartment over a portico that purports to stately stand. He has trains we have not seen. They run all over his spacious room on the Lionel O gauge track we cannot summon to our life. He has the Santa Fe and New York Central and the Illinois Central and the Wabash Line. He has the Rock Island Line and the very green Southern and his heart is broken open by the pantograph behemoth of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

Johnny Andrews is Negro and wears the khaki slacks and Oxford shirts and penny loafers a white boy should. When we ride with Johnny Andrews, we ride and ride and then ride and ride some more and still we are riding through a tunnel that allows the shafts of holy afternoon light. We ride in the reckless rampaging way a subway should, on straightaways and curves that test the screeching power of any wheel, the train now in the groove of its own commotion, extending us beyond Pennsylvania Station and the tabernacle for Christ Jesus, Johnny Andrews saying, Depth? I will show you depth. I will show you the distance you need to come should you ever wish to be with me.

Ebbets Field has a curving face full of windows and Negro boys showing no fear of eights as they scale a wire cliff. Anarchy is afoot that Brooklyn minds have conjured. Where the tickets lead is to an outfield view that brings no sense to where we are. A fly ball is hit and yet the catcher runs under it in an erratic circle with his mask far-flung. Roy Campanella applies his squat power to a pitch and breaks the seat right next to me with his home run swing. Paper blows in the wind and the bases are tilted on a field that

is not level with the earth. All I know is that the New York Giants have come to Brooklyn and mean business with the squad they have; that Foster Castleman should have such a name and show such ostentatious harmony with the ground balls that come to his glove.

Newk's uniform is a pure white with powder blue and a burning number 27 in fire engine red on his broad back. Newk throws hard. He throws fast. He throws from over the top in a burly motion all his own. His pants are baggy for his legs that thrust and it is no matter where his mind goes so long as the ball is featured in the catcher's glove. Gil Hodges crouches on the rich brown dirt so he can be ready with his first baseman's glove and Jackie Robinson has the spirit of his own fire right next door. The National League means something old but new and apart from anything the American League can be. Yankee Stadium is white teeth and Ballantine ale and white men with hot dogs in their mouth. The National League is old newspapers blowing across the outfield grass and billboards a mile high. It is a ballpark with the forlornness of a city at desolation twilight coming alive in the electric illumination of grass and steel. I don't know where I am, only that it is Brooklyn and we are high up and the masses are all around.

Johnny Andrews has raccoon eyes. There are circles of darkness around their brilliant whiteness. He is not a tormented Negro. He does not live in the unending anger of those in the hotel down the block and claims no allegiance to the warrior kingdom they represent on the streets they walk: no fist-balled ditty bop shuffle, no conk over pomaded hair or death-defying colored shirts or pants with toreador tightness. He has not taken to their sound or their in-the-moment mode, for Johnny Andrews operates in another sphere. He and Luke display their mechanical minds upon the Hallicrafters shortwave radio. I can

only admire the radio, a gray metal box with a glass window that houses an active brain, from a distance.

If Johnny Andrews has sorrow in his life, it is not because of his mother, who offers him acclaim, or his grandfather, who walks with the age that he has come to. The three live together in an apartment to which we are not invited. About his father there is no news to report. He does not broadcast from Hamburg, Germany, or any other outpost on the shortwave radio, and shouts no hellos in the subway tunnels through which we ride. We only know that he is not here upon the ground that Johnny Andrews walks.

Claremont Avenue runs parallel with Broadway and has quality upon the subtly ornate and otherwise complicated faces of the buildings that run along its east side. The buildings of Barnard College stand on the west side of the avenue from its southern tip to One Hundred Twenty-Second Street, where the gothic buildings of the Union Theological Seminary take over. Chock Full O' Nuts on One Hundred Sixteenth Street and Broadway stands as a cheerful gateway to this avenue of Ivy League success. (About Prexie's, on One hundred Fourteenth Street, which offers the hamburger with a college education, or Riker's one block north, which brings your burger on a seeded bun on a conveyor belt built to last, we will say not a word. We are not here for the chronic products of America but to meditate on the sum total of a son of America's worth in the concrete environs in which he was birthed.)

White boys with genius faces emerge from the well-maintained buildings of Claremont Avenue in khaki pants and Oxford shirts and penny loafers worn without a hint of socks to greet Johnny Andrews while the wood-paneled station wagons of their fathers stand at rest in their parking spaces. Against the wall of a Barnard building with

wire screens on the windows of its cafeteria do they play handball. A Spaldeen is a thing of magic in the hand of Johnny Andrews. Time and again he cuts it low and close to the line in retaliation for the nerve they show in sending it his way.

How Johnny Miller knows such boys, who have order at their core, is not a mystery, as he has excellence to match or surpass their own in the quality of his mind and his handsome face and lithe body. Now is he, so rich in blackness, yet part of the landscape of their white boy minds, a fact for them to marvel on.

The school is good to me. It lets me read out loud First Corinthians, Chapter 13, *When I was a child I spake as a child*, in the small chapel during the morning service. In my ears are Momma's strong if whispered words: "Do not let them take you away from God. Do not let them obscure the great fact that he is the way, the truth, and the light and in so doing plunge you into worldliness." Momma saying I must persevere with her faith, that the power of their God is but a pale approximation of what He can do in the omnipotence of His unbound ways.

In spring the silver and green Campus Coach line buses roll up in front of the school for our picnic day in Tibbetts Brook Park, in Yonkers. There are forays into the hills, and franks and marshmallows speared on sticks for roasting on the open fires. Nuns in black are seen among the tall trees and in the meadow. My senses report the smell of waxed paper, the victor of the one-legged race, and the thud, not the crack, of the bat as it connects with the softball. The air is everywhere and I am in it.

Deborah Baird has beauty different from the sunlight of Alison Pauley's blond hair. Her own hair is brown and refuses to exceed the length of her neckline. Internal currents are alive and visible in her serious face. Her mind accompanies her wherever she goes, and always it is alone, as if she has need of privacy for her personal thoughts. Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy have found no way to claim her for their own; she exists as a solitary star in her own universe. And yet her beauty is undeniable, a magnet for all who would occupy her space. Even the freckles on her nose make the boys delirious.

But Deborah will not retire if you approach her. She will hit you with the full candor that is her way. In Riverside Park, where she has gone to walk her dog, I say to her, "Is your dog a he or a she?" She lifts her terrier by its forelegs. "You tell me," she replies, the dog's penis on full display. And so does she defeat me, transforming my question and the connection motive behind it into a hellish bomb of shame that shuts me down completely, making anything more than a weak smile and quick departure impossible.

Alan Banner is new to the class. He has hair that stands at attention, like my camp counselor Bob Pellalugra, and some notion that Deborah Baird has a liking for him. He says he poked Deborah with a pencil and she smiled and that now we should go calling on her at her home so he can feel her up. *Feel her up*. Those words sound wrong in my ears even as they excite me. Now Deborah Baird lives in the same building as Edward Macy, but is no more part of his world than she is in the domain of Johnny Donatelli, the super's son, so when Alan Banner and I come calling, she is there to receive us on her own and with no flock of friends in sight. Deborah Baird, having forthrightness in her bones, opens the door wide and allows us in, saying with her action that she may be

private but that does not mean she has anything to hide if we come knocking. She has showed me her dog's penis and now she shows us her apartment. Her mother is out working, she says to Alan Banner when he asks, and no, her father does not live with her. When it happens I cannot say, because it is all delirium in my mind, but Alan Banner does just what he said he would, touching Deborah Baird not with a pencil but with his hand, causing her to scream in anger. In a hurry is Alan Banner out the door. "Why did he do that?" Deborah Baird screams at me, and there are tears in her eyes. "I don't know. I'm sorry," I say, leaving as I speak.

"I am watching you. Do you understand what I mean when I say I am watching you?" the Reverend Mother says to me the next week.

"Yes," I say.

"Be very careful now. Be very, very careful."

"Yes," I say again, which is all I can ever say to the Reverend Mother.

Alan Banner can't say anything to the Reverend Mother. He is gone away for good.

The books are my own. The school says that this is so. But they are a burden on my sight, a reminder of everything I failed to do. They must not sit in my summer of freedom. They must be deposited in the incinerator so they may never again be seen and I can have my new beginning in the air of summer.

The mimeographed reading list contains in blue ink the books a child should read to end the vacillation of his intellect and spark his wonder about worlds unseen. They are books with titles like *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Treasure Island*, full of harbor lights

and island mysteries and men in iron masks with strong intentions. They are designed to lift you from your own sorrow into a connection with foreign lands and centuries not your own. They are places for children to go when they cannot be with themselves., when the agitation of their own feet, the climbing, the alleyway exploring, the dogs in full-throated barking are not enough. But that time has not come. I do not need their weight upon me when I have green grass to lie in and a stickball bat and Mission soda and Drakes cakes and the Hudson River to be my own in the indolence of summer, not when the trains are running all the time and wild scallions can be plucked from the earth.

An older sister is upon the earth to go here and there, but Naomi, like Hannah, is mostly in the vicinity of the building, where she can be sustained by those who are supposed to love her. And yet the single room she shares with Chuck and Jeanne, their little girl, has no air she can breathe that does not smell as stale as her life. She reaches for her feel-good pills while Chuck drinks endless amounts of wine, wrapping his mean sliver lips around the mouth of green pint bottles to start the afternoon in seeking what peace he can find. Every day is Naomi taking money from Momma so she and Chuck can go to the New Moon Palace for Chinese food or elsewhere, for they do not cook, although they have a stove and a small refrigerator in their room. And they have no jobs, if yu discount the work Chuck does sitting in the lobby for Auntie Eve several nights a week. And as for Jeanne, she is more and more in the care of Momma when it comes to feeding.

“They mean her no good. She takes pills that provide no definition for her days,” Momma says.

“Who are they?” I say.

“They are licensed drug dealers in office suites and hospital corridors who dispense these pills to the troubled and the afflicted without an ounce of love or caring, as if a pill can treat the illness that afflicts my daughter.”

“What is that illness, Momma?”

“Naomi is living with a supremely selfish man who is influencing her in the wrong way. What else can it be?” Momma says.

“I wish they would leave. I wish they would just go away. And Hannah, too,” I say.

“Have I not told you before that you do not know what it is to have children that you must care for and worry about night and day? Have I not told you, this, my son? Have I not told you what it is to have a condition, and that you yourself might be so afflicted that you too might not be able to handle stress and care for yourself on this earth?”

Momma and her talk, professing not to be troubled that Naomi should be so near while she herself has come so far, plunging into the frigid waters of the Baltic Sea and swimming the Atlantic with only the fishes of the deep singing sweet songs for company to the shores of America. But though Momma does not listen to those who find fault that her daughters are in dry dock and not upon the high seas with their own lives, yet can she be heard to cry at night that girls of hers should be so failure-bound. And when I hear those cries I know I must assume the mantle of obedience and walk a straight line for her whose heart is being broken daily.

“My prayer is that we will all be in heaven together. That is my prayer,” Momma says, once again and when she speaks in such a way, with only darkness around her, then I must be silent for the moment amid the anxieties of my own mind.

And yet am I angry, so very, very angry, that Momma will turn me around and turn me around with my complaint and not hear the words I speak and take them for what they are.

When I turn the corner, Harry Frug is outside his radio shop among a throng from the neighborhood clogging the side street and sidewalk, their heads skyward in the direction of the ninth floor of our building, where a woman stands on a narrow ledge in a robe of yellow. “It’s the landlady’s daughter. You know, that religious family. Are they ever crazy in a sad way...” someone says. I place my hands over my ears, not wanting to hear.

Have you seen the concrete of New York City? Have you seen the hellish firmness of patiently waiting asphalt? Do you imagine steel and metal and all the appurtenances of our street to be accommodating of the falling flesh of those we only want to love?

The firemen of New York City have come in their shiny red trucks and even a hook-and-ladder and the police also arrive with sirens wailing on their black and white cars. Though I want to run away, terror keeps me rooted to the spot. If I move, Naomi will, too. Her life depends on my remaining perfectly still. Just please, please...But now one of the police officers has appeared in the window. He is leaning out, talking with Naomi, trying to coax her inside. His hand is gently offered. She takes it. I drift away and find a stoop to sit on and hold my head real tight between my hands. A while later an

ambulance arrives. The crowd has dispersed. As I enter the building, Naomi is being led out. She still has on that yellow robe. There is no smile, no smirk, just a face of anger.

What she is seeing I don't know, but it isn't me.

"It is some modern-day phenomenon, the way these doctors routinely dispense pills. I don't know how many times I have suggested to your sister that she drink a little when she is blue instead of relying on these medications, which do nothing but undermine the stability of our home life," Chuck says, drawing on his Pall Mall and flicking the ash into an empty cardboard coffee cup on the table by the armchair where he sits in the lobby.

"Of course there are those who will see some kind of histrionics behind public displays of this kind and say she is committed to neither life nor dying, thus reducing this averted tragedy to a high-wire act, a stunt. They will say further that one way or another she is desperate to be seen. If she can't wow people with 'The Man Who Got Away,' then then she will stand on a window ledge poised to swan dive into the concrete pavement below. But with their little minds they will not understand her passion. Your sister is a woman who wants more than life can give her."

Later, Momma says Naomi is being kept for observation in a psychiatric unit of St. Luke's Hospital. "The doctors will give her more of those pills. They are in love with their own minds and put ideas into her head. They tell her she is sick when she isn't. They would drive her to her death if they could so as to make fools of us, saying we have been driven to invest love in the perishable," Momma says.

"Chuck says the same thing," I say.

"He is a very selfish man," Momma says. "The drink makes a man selfish. It infects him with foolishness and lies and leads him into darkness and death. We must grasp the life of the spirit. It is only that which turns us to the light. Are you listening, my son?"

"I'm listening, Momma," I say.

"Because you must have ears to hear me if you are to be saved."

"Yes, Momma."

"Salvation is our only goal. Our *only* goal," Momma says.

To which I can only say, "Yes, Momma."

Luke's classmate Jason Justly is a physical presence with the power to make you fall down dead that such beauty should stand before you. Beyond that is he athletically gifted with the ability to swing a crunching bat and elevate off the ground for deadly jump shots from all angles of the court. Yet does he hold himself in an unassuming way even as the heads of the girls do turn.

Luke says a social connection must be made and that it is not enough to stand in classrooms or on streetcorners with Jason Justly. We must bring him into our apartment. All the alarm bells are ringing in my head even as my brother speaks. Has he lost his mind? It is true that we have painted our room and covered the wretched wood floor with brown linoleum so that it has a semblance of order, but does he not see that the rest of the apartment is a reclamation project beyond our ability to achieve?

But action is Luke's directive of the day. We are creating order where none has been. In the hallway outside our room, we sort through piles of paper on a bookshelf,

tossing most of them, and stand what books there are on the vertical. With soap and water do we attack the dirt stains on the living room wall where our heads have been as we sit on the sofa bed and scour the oilskin cloth that covers the dining room table. A day we put aside for this effort.

Still is it like nothing the world has ever seen to have Jason Justly at our apartment for a sleep-over. It is not for me to close my eyes all night. My father feeds him the dead bones of Armenians. Momma reads to him from the Book of Revelation, warning him of the beast who is soon to walk the earth. The predatory intentions of my sisters are madly manifest when they arrive with knives and forks to devour him, vengeance being all theirs when he does not kiss the big feet they place before him.

And yet does Jason Justly live to see our apartment in the light of day. Yet does he rise from the cot he has been supplied to use our squalid bathroom and to see my father in his tattered robe. Where are you from, Luke, that you can perform such an act? Where have you acquired such blinders that you cannot see what you have done? Do you not fathom the dimensions of the shame that spreads from me to everything I touch that has our name upon it? Do you not see the lowly position where we have been placed that no cleaning can disguise? Do you not see that Jason Justly has no blemishes upon his body or upon his mind and is from a world we cannot acquire? Do you not see that it is death to have him present in our hovel headquarters?

If Jason Justly has a father, he is not on the premises of the East Side apartment where Jason lives with his mother. Nowhere is there evidence of him in the clean, uncluttered spaces of these rooms where only the stamp of normalcy can be seen. You do not ask

someone such as Jason Justly where his father has gone. It is not a question you insert into his mind, not when he has the quality of the birth he has been given. Because Jason Justly walks on the high ground of his own self-respect. He has the energy of his own endowment to see him through.

A summer league is in session for those who would elevate above the humdrum street by wearing uniforms on the baseball diamonds of Manhattan. In Riverside Park and on Randall's Island and at Baker's Field at the far end of Manhattan are boys set in motion on the base paths and in the outfield and on the mound. Danny Cott Logan comes over the top and from the side, raising and rocking and firing his express, the ball thudding into the catcher's mitt. From Harlem and all over the West Side do we come in the summer heat to have a whack at Danny Cott Logan's hardball stuff.

It is one thing to have strength. It is one thing to have power. It is another to be an upright twig upon the earth and to hold a bat that is thicker than your arm. Danny Cott Logan's fastball rises and it dips. It snaps and it snarls. It hisses in a backward motion like a cat with arcing back before attacking the blackness of the plate. It is for Danny Cott Logan to dispatch me with a weak ground out to the box.

And it is for Jason Justly in his sleeveless T-shirt to swing a weighted bat in the on-deck circle and then to tap the iron doughnut free and stand waiting in his own cool breeze. And it is for Jason Justly to make the scene come further alive with the cracking sound of bat on ball and for us to watch its elegant arc far over the leftfielder's head. There is no one with the ear for music Jason Justly has displayed or the gracefulness he shows with his elegant glide around all three bases and the lightness of his home plate touch.

Because Jason Justly can wear a yellow T-shirt and make it sing and do the same with the blue jeans he fills so well, it is for me to listen to this music that his body makes and, when he is out of sight, to replicate the garb that gives such credence to his look. But now, before the full-length mirror, I see the clothes that in my mind were making such a sound so bright are crying their despair at the poor imitation that has been achieved. It is for the mirror to tell me the sad truth that Jason Justly cannot be approximated with the bones and flesh that I am made of. And Momma can do nothing to protect me from this truth by holding me to her and saying I am her Svenska pojka forever.

The school has moved farther south, leaving the two buildings that face the Hotel of the Negroes for a Riverside Drive location six blocks away, where now the school will be housed in a former mansion with large formidable windows and an exterior of dull whiteness. The previous owners have fled into history so the nuns can more permanently stamp the word “serious” on our foreheads. Someone says the departed have taken to hiding under the floor, but wherever they have gone, they do not come out.

The fall has come, and with it brisker air encouraging us to drink from the cold but fortifying cup of knowledge, the nuns say. But there is also Columbus Day, when I can be away from the rigors of their mentality in Riverside Park with Jerry-Jones Nobleonian, where the itchy balls have been falling from the plane trees. If we start in the railroad tunnel, we do not linger there, heading north to its end and the full light of day. We follow the tracks to One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street, where strong men in blood-

smearing aprons unload a refrigerated boxcar. All along the tracks are metal hooks on which sides of beef are hung. Farther on, we paused at a crumbling loading dock.

“This isn’t good,” I say to Jerry.

“What’s not good?”

“Look at these sidings. The railroad tracks are rusty. It’s like the railroad is slowly dying.”

“That’s right, man. It’s over for the railroads. Trucks are what it’s about now. And airplanes.”

His words separate me from him. Unfriendly words they are, telling me that the gray and white engines of the New York Central will not always be running on these tracks and through the deep woods to the north.

Some fear comes over me that we are in danger, the same fear that I have had before. Now it is that the Puerto Ricans are coming with their knives. Already one kid has pointed an icepick at my belly just a month before and demanded all my money. And then there were the Puerto Rican kids who kicked me off my bike and stole it by Grant’s Tomb.

And so we drift south again out of the yards and onto the top level of Riverside Park. A motorcade of limousines, American flags fluttering on their hoods, has stopped in front of the boxy new building that stands on the corner of One Hundred Twentieth Street, just opposite Riverside Church. And there is Dwight David Eisenhower seated in one such limousine and waving to the crowd. Eisenhower it is, with his balding head and beaming smile. Like a woman does he smile, with light and warmth and softness, though he had the power to make the Germans fall down dying and now has the power to rule.

Everywhere are policemen seen so no one can hurt the President, whose head is aglow, as if by some soft inner light. Someone says he is there to dedicate the cornerstone of the new building.

The cornerstone has a small stone jutting from it, we see, when the president and his motorcade have gone. Inscribed in the limestone are the words "This stone is from the Agora in Corinth, where many hearing Paul believed."

"President Eisenhower is the light of the world. God was working in him that he saved us from the Nazis," Momma says.

"The building will have many religious organizations. That is what they were saying, Momma."

"Yes, but do they have the one religion by which the building can live in the Lord, and without which it cannot? I am suspecting that it doesn't," Momma says.

"Why do you suspect that, Momma?"

"There are those who make professions of faith but who have not truly received the word," Momma says, putting her doubt upon the building.

The world is made up of *pi*, Sister Mary Elise tells the class. It is everywhere that a true mathematician casts his gaze. She speaks at a distance from my mind and makes the blackboard a threat with the numbers she places there with a loud, attacking piece of chalk. With one swipe of the eraser, the figures are all gone, and over the cloudy residue new ones appear, the chalk an agile weapon of destruction in her hand.

Outside the Puerto Rican boys wait to hit us in the face with dead pigeons. They do not care about *pi*, but live solely in the delirium of ecstatic revenge that we do not see

them better than we do. Those who can escape the tussle go to the corner pizza shop, but it is a place I know not to go, given the dangers a congregation of my schoolmates can pose when planning parties for their own while Phil and Don Everly are having their say, singing “Bye Bye Love” into young ears.

The next morning *pi* is still there, summoning me to a level of understanding I cannot rise to. And now there are formidable quantities of Latin and French and something called earth science, and textbooks that weigh ten pounds.

Cynthia Fairbridge is a stump of a girl with a face that has bypassed youngness. She has *pi* in her pocket and a statement in need of immediate release.

“You took my pencil case. Now please give it back.”

While she has risen so small, her father looms large with a covering of white hair to crown his intellect. He comes from England, where fairness is the rule.

“Have you, indeed, taken my daughter’s pencil case?” He wears glasses to fortify his face and a handsome suit and tie, and the leather bag he carries bears the documents his mind has manufactured.

“No,” I say. And in fact I haven’t. Not a thing have I taken from Cynthia Belton that she should come at me with her accusation that would put me in such a dark place. What is the ground she stands on that allows her to go in this direction and call on the air power of her father? What are the alliances that would keep me from the true halls of justice? What are the death squads that have been assigned to me?

Luke may be a “Blue Moon” angel with his pompadour his most remarkable feat. He may ensconce himself in a booth at the pizzeria with the boys and girls of the eighth grade, but the school is a train pulling out of the station on which I stand. I don’t

understand *pi*. I don't understand my life there. I am not ready to begin what needs to begin. And so chalk must be thrown and spitballs must fly. No one must pay attention to me except for the antics I perform, which lead to my now and then banishment from the class.

When I enter the boys' bathroom on the second floor, Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy are facing the door, as if they have been expecting me. Their appearance of unity is unsettling, as is the smiles on their faces that suggest they know something about me I would rather they didn't. The moment has presented a naked truth. They are better than me, stronger than me, smarter than me. In every department are they my superior. It is that which their smiles convey. But a boy has a life to live. He cannot give in to such a soul-destroying proposition. He does have a right to survive, does he not? Yes, they have fathers who walk with one hand in their pockets. Yes, they have homes that blaze with beauty. Yes, they have the superiority that their minds have conferred. And yes, they have the smiles that register their recognition that I must disintegrate before their very eyes. They are in that moment the party I have not been invited to, the social hegemony that keeps me apart and requires me to flee to the streets. Their grins are a torment, claiming ownership of my very being.

A box containing toilet paper is by the window. I take several rolls and fling them one by one out the open window at the convoy of nuns on the sidewalk below as they are returning to the school. The power of surprise is mine. I have done what I need to do to break the bond of this unbearable intimacy with Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy. I am throwing the toilet paper to save my life. And yes, the nuns look up, as well they should, to have rolls of toilet paper bouncing off their black robes. And yes their pale

faces register surprise that a convoy of the mighty should be attacked by a minion of their state. And so too do I register the changed expressions on the faces of Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy. Now, though they are looking at me, it is I who am looking at them—at these faces that a minute before were the picture of mockery now expressing smiling astonishment at what a boy can do when his power is unleashed.

I am alone in a room where the Reverend Mother has told me I must wait. In the hallway do I hear the noise of the children of innocence and their laughter. The window facing west looks out on the trees of Riverside Park and the Hudson River, and along the drive the cars and buses of New York City are going on about their day. Immediately below are the wide stairs of the school leading to the entrance.

And now does Momma appear at the base of those stairs and begin to make her slow ascent with the weight of all her sorrow upon her. Momma does not lift her eyes to the window where I stand, and I do not open the window and call down to her so she will know where I have been positioned. Momma is being Momma, in keeping her focus on the step at hand in the methodical nature of her ways, with the earth an affliction she must bear. These steps lack the gravity of the staircase from the subway to the church. There is no need to support her from behind should she fall.

Now Momma is somewhere in the school, but I do not know where. When the waiting goes on, I remove my jacket and make it a pillow for my head in the corner where I lie curled on the floor. Someday I too can be a floor, or a window, or a wall, and feel nothing of what I am feeling now.

When Momma comes, she comes alone. "Give me your hand. We must go now," Momma says, reaching down for me.

"Momma, are they reviling me? Are they casting me out to the ends of the earth? Momma, have they been made to get up so I can be free?"

"What ails you, my son? What ails you?" Momma says, when she can finally speak. "Why do you cast yourself into the wind of turbulence where the peace of God should reign?"

Momma holds me by the wrists and searches my mind. But her eyes are not now an invading army of *knowingness*. I can tell her only what my thoughts have come to be, that the privileged have taken it upon themselves to remove me from my seat and drive me into the street, that they have assigned me to the alleyways and byways but not to the bastions where their faces preside. I tell her that their last names rely on vowels and that they show a smug and assuming superiority over the name that I can muster. I tell her that their fathers walk with one hand in their pockets and sit with the Reverend Mother on the throne of power. I tell her that I am not an American boy. I tell her that I am just a Negro of New York City.

"Ushtah, my son, ushtah," Momma says, but fear has replaced her repudiating strength. Momma escalates into the air, where she can hover with a face of stupefied wonder, as I interpret the world to her. She is waiting now on God for the next move she should make on an earth that cannot hold her feet.

There is no structure to be had at this school. Its shape has gone all to pieces. All day long people drift up and down the wide, winding marble staircase while holding onto the

wrought-iron banister. Edwin Schwarz has food stuck in his braces. Melanie Gringold has glue in her brown hair. Johnny Kumarte walks about in his underwear and fat Alice Katz eats candy bars all morning long.

At the lunch hour some of us sleep on the floor. Others drift into Central Park and sprawl on the benches. I allow myself to be blown down Columbus Avenue, where hot dogs with sauerkraut can be bought at Seventy-Second Street and you can eat standing while the cars and buses go on by.

Momma has told me I am special even if I can't do *pi*. She will not have me in the public schools, where violence is unafraid to go. She wants me safe in green pastures and still waters, and yet where people of quality can be found and aspiration lives so I can have an education from the books she fears.

Mr. Cacciote says science is seeing. It is the air we breathe and the water we drink. Mr. Cacciote implores us to see science everywhere, even in the beds where we sleep. We listen to Mr. Cacciote with full stomachs and our heads on the desk.

Now that I am away from my Episcopal school, now that it has uttered the word *expelled*, I cannot be part of its garden. I cannot attach myself to the quality I was exposed to given the books that went unread. There is an ache for where I once was, and a shame at where I now am.

Momma tried to get me into good schools, but they measured my worth and told me to go away. They saw my flat head. They saw my small mind. They saw my failure with *pi* and my meager thighs. They saw my bad teeth. They told me I was worthless in America with my long last name. They told me there was a bar against my existence and

that they had placed it there. They said this from behind the big desks that they commanded.

Today we are intent on denying access to Mr. Cacciote. Chairs, desks, shelves are piled against the door as an impediment to Mr. Cacciote's science talk. The man cannot get in and we cannot get out. We fall to the floor laughing. Outside a commotion can be heard. The principal himself has been called. Mr. Foley pounds with an insistence Mr. Cacciote cannot summon, and uses force when we show ourselves unwilling. Flushed and sweating does he enter the room. "You must not...you cannot..." Our hands clamp tighter on our ears.

When Mr. Cacciote is finally alone with us he says, "I saw some science today. I would like so much to tell you what it was I saw, but first, if we may, I would be more than interested to hear the science you yourselves have been privileged to see."

"I saw fire in the basement. It burned my mother and my father all to death. I walked on a string high in the air just so I could get here," Eleanor Gringold says.

"That's some very imaginative science," Mr. Cacciote says. "The inexorable progression of combustion and the saving grace of balance. Excellent. Excellent. Now how about you, Edwin?"

"I saw a fat man on the subway platform and pushed him off for his own good. The train cut off both his legs. He thanked me from the bottom of his heart for helping him to lose weight." Edwin Schwartz sticks a finger in each wide nostril.

His hand supporting his chin, Mr. Cacciote studies Edwin for a moment. “Edwin, you have illustrated again a key point about good science. Creativity is behind all groundbreaking discoveries.”

Mr. Cacciote turns his attention to Johnny Kumarte, who has his head on the desk. It is kind of creepy to see his head like that with his big eyes open. “Johnny? Oh Johnny?” Mr. Cacciote calls to Johnny Kumarte softly, from a wooing world of warmth and mystery. Johnny Kumarte raises his head ever so slowly. He then stands up and walks some paces toward the back of the room, the fingers of his right hand twitchy. Johnny Kumarte is clearly getting ready to sling some heavy lead. Johnny Kumarte is no amateur gunslinger. He draws fast, sweeping his left hand over the hammer to cock it and plugging Mr. Cacciote with a bull’s-eye to the forehead. Mr. Cacciote does not fall down dead. He straightens his tie and tries to get his shirt collar to behave.

“Thank you, Johnny, thank you. That was a clear refutation of the idea that science is inherently tedious. You have brought it to life in a powerful way.”

The window is open. Spring is in the air. Nobody jumps to its rescue.

Trudy Powell has come to save us. It is spring in New York City and no time for the destruction of the innocents, she says, announcing that we are going to Yankee Stadium and that the prime minister of India may join us. But the prime minister is not among us on the night Jim Perry of the Cleveland Indians shuts down the Yankees in a no-nonsense way, throwing over the top with all the meanness he can muster.

The grass glows green, the lights shine bright, the infield turns a rich dark brown with the hosing that the groundskeepers administer, and everywhere on outfield

billboards is the song of America being sung. I do not like for the Yankees to be cast down in this way. I am identified with their pinstripe worth. The nighttime air is chilly, and the score lacks warmth as well, that Mickey Mantle should have to fan and fan with futile southside swings.

Trudy Powell is not finished. “We must go where your father lives in daylight hours,” Trudy Powell says to me in yes, the daylight hours, with school in session. By the hand she takes me and we ride the bus down Broadway to Jack Dempsey’s restaurant. There my father is, beyond the colorful bottles at the big oval bar and looking down at the gleaming silver cash register. Looking up from the bills he has been counting, my father turns and sees me with eyes that smolder. Slowly he approaches. There is pain. There is shame. He is a stranger. He is my father. He is... I don’t know.

“Who are you, please?” my father asks, unsmiling.

“Who am I? I am Trudy Powell,” she says, as if her name could be enough.

“And do you know who I am?”

“I believe you are Gideon’s father. Gideon told me that you work for a very famous restaurant, and so here we are. I’m so glad to meet you,” Trudy Powell says, thrusting out her hand.

Just like that my father’s face breaks apart into a smile, as if he is falling, falling, from the great height of his severity and can’t stop the plunge. My father is helpless against Trudy Powell.

“You must not think a father is a sometime thing, a negligible figure in the proportions he brings to bear. They have a place in the world,” says Trudy Powell, after

my father has gone away. When the hamburgers arrive, we eat in the silence that has come over us.

It is a large room in the school full of empty spaces in which the talk of boys goes on uninterrupted. I hear the names Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford and Elston Howard and Yogi Berra. I hear the disappearance of difference that would keep me silent. A door has opened and I can walk through it. Now I too am talking. Batting averages. Earned run averages. Mickey Mantle and Frank Robinson and Willie Mays and Duke Snider and hammering Hank Aaron and Stan Musial and Warren Spahn and Lew Burdette. And there are other names too, like Oscar Robertson and Jerry Lucas and Jerry West and NIT and NCAA and the St. John's Redmen and the Providence Friars and Wilt the Stilt and Bill Russell and Bob Cousy.

Though Marty Bauman is truly a boy, his face has more age on it than it should. His hair and his eyebrows are lighter than blond and his face is whiter than pale. His baseball words fly across spaces at a volume and an intensity he cannot control.

If I have been missing the quality and the structure of the Episcopal school, it is not for me to bring it back. Once I had Sister Mary Christabel, and now I have Mr. Cacciote, who tells us silence is also science in the classroom that features the hush that he has imposed.

Marty Bauman says I am not bound to the paths that I have been on, and that it is possible to sleep in a bed in another borough with the moon overhead and Broadway not in its midst. Marty Bauman wants to show me that a train can go up as well as down and that I can emerge from a station I have never seen onto a street I have never walked.

Marty Bauman wants to show me what it is to live in a building of blond brick on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx and to stay in an apartment with a sunken living room..

Marty Bauman's father is a doctor. I sit with him and Marty and Marty's mother at the dinner table, a candelabra like antlers in the middle of it. Marty has invited me for the seder. Matzoh ball soup, gefilte fish, food foreign to my tongue, is served. The air is heavy with the silence that has been imposed. This is not a dinner but a funeral. Dr. Bauman is intensely unhappy with his son's big head, I am left to conclude, while I am free and invisible in Marty's parents' eyes.

That summer Momma rewards me with a departure. I have been reading *Sport* and *The Sporting News*. In winter I am kept fully abreast of the latest rumors from the hot stove league and in summer, as now, I am up-to-date on the action on the field. I am eleven going on twelve and the city streets have their entertainment: loadsies and off-the-wall and stoop ball and high-top Keds to enable my exploratory urges. But now I have seen the great Mickey Mantle and what the number 7 can mean on his broad back and the patience at the plate of number 6, Stan Musial, in Cardinal red, and the fleet feet of Luis Aparicio of the ChiSox and the happy play of Minnie Minoso and the off-the-table curveball of Camilio Pascual and the sullen bat play of Vic Power when he is at the plate and the baleful home run mastery of Eddie Mathews, who dares to have only one "t" in his last name and to make the number 41 come alive with his nonchalant left-handed power. I know what is a Comiskey Park and for the sun to burn away the wetness in Milwaukee County Stadium or for big George Crowe to go deep in Crosley Field and to fall down dead at the sight of all legs Frank Robinson in his Redlegs uniform. I know

what it is to see the elegant high leg kick of a Warren Spahn and to have an able part of the pitching corps in Bob Buhl. I know what it means to have a number working for you in terms of your personal happiness: 18 and 3, .320 batting average, and to witness line drives to center and to right and down the left field line. I know the smell of hot dogs and what it is to eat them and what a patch of outfield green can mean when glimpsed from the subway el. I know what it is to see men playing from afar in stadiums built not for time but for the memory of all of that.

The bus has wheels that are not required to round the bases and cannot be defeated by a sudden downpour. They are only asked to stay in motion on the interstates of America. They are Greyhound wheels that say "Leave the driving to us." And when the bus pulls out of the terminal near Penn Station, it cannot travel on the rails or take the tabernacle of the worshipful with it. No, it must go out on its own with a clear vision of the America that is waiting, traveling with purpose over the roads it was made for and shunning those unfriendly to its width. Everywhere there is the smell of burning rubber and the twisted wreckage of the cars that have gone astray. Everywhere men, women, and children are suffering the pain of their own burnt flesh. The trains are not laughing in pleasure at the carnage. They have adopted the blinders of horses. They too know to adopt an impassive face in the conquistador's arena of triumph. Do you know the ecstatic heartbreak of a city like Pittsburgh, covered in its own soot and with a name like the Monongahela River to contend with? Or to visit a trolley track that holds off the asphalt standing by or to have the words torn out of you in acknowledgment of stupefying pain that Momma is not where the city is to be found or to experience tunnels so very long carved in the mountains that the bus takes it upon itself to explore? Where are the men

who built these tunnels? Where are their jackhammer biceps and their helmets and their lunch buckets and their white T-shirts and their flannel shirts of many colors? Have they left their thermoses behind? Their newspapers? Show me the waxed paper in which their sandwiches were wrapped. Just show me, that I may have some vestige of the manliness in which they stood outside of books and in the actions that they took.

There are fruit and vegetable stands along the road as the products of the people living close to the earth, with soil pushed up into their nostrils so they can live and breathe it. People who sheathe their hands in soil in going where the worms are to be found, people who know the put-put-put of a tractor coming to life and what can happen in a field of corn and what the smell of burning shucks not violating but living within the clean air can bring in rooting them where they are forever. People who live in ramshackle homes and have a very private understanding with their very own Jesus of what it means to wear their Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes. They stand shoeless by their roadside stalls in their plainness, their mouths crowded with bad teeth.

The signs along the way. The sky open and clear and endlessly blue. The sun, egg yolk yellow, pouring down on America.

Ben and Anna met.

Ben and Anna had a fight.

Ben-Anna split

Ohio and Indiana cannot stop us. The space between me and Momma now an ocean the land seeks to disguise.

A potbellied man in a St. Louis Cardinals uniform awaits me at the side of the road. Even in the darkness the white and the red of his uniform explodes. The camp is

only a short ride away in his pickup truck, which rattles over a dirt road. The man leads me to a cabin and shines a small flashlight at a bunk bed and pats the top berth.

The pain has a life of its own. That I could have done such a thing to myself. That I could have left Momma so alone. Slowly the song of the crickets comes to my ears, a song with its own deep-throated rhythm. I take off my sneakers but sleep in my clothes.

In the morning I am woken not by crickets but by the sound of a bugle. Reveille is being sounded. Daylight leaves me no place to hide. There must be twenty other bunk beds in the room. Boys snap towels at each other's bottoms. I hear water spraying from the shower heads and the sound of their voices echoing off the tiles. No light should be so clear. No light should be so pitiless.

The day is the pledge of allegiance and frosted flakes for breakfast and men with tanned, weathered faces hitting fungoes and ground balls to kids of all ages on the several baseball diamonds. It is sitting alone when others sit together. It is a man with a scrubbed face telling me I need to wash behind my ears. Mostly it is Momma pulling me to her, saying it is no use, Momma is everything, the lighted ball field in the night and every thought my mind can make.

I have come upon a sea I cannot swim. I must turn back. I must.

“What is that you say? A collect call?”

Momma does not have a voice that does not recognize me as her own and draws me into her warmth. This is the voice of someone with clothes hanging from her gaunt frame. It is the voice of Auntie Eve. She does not know me, not in the way that Momma can.

“Yes. A collect call from Gideon Garatdjian for a Mrs. Garatdjian from Cuba, Missouri?”?

“Missouri?”

“Auntie Eve. It’s me, Gideon. I have to speak with my mother. Please.”

“Ma’am, will you accept the call?”

“Maya is not here. Maya is in the hospital.” Maya is Momma. Momma cannot hide behind any name but that.

“Why is Momma in the hospital?” I scream.

“Ma’am, once again, will you accept this call?”

But the line is now dead and I go frantic in the night. There is not time for another call. I must go now. I must. I run into the main building and I scream. “Momma is dying and I must go now. I very much must. I will run where the crickets are singing if you try to stall me. I will do my utmost to run straight into a tree.”

“You can run wherever you please, young man. But someday you will have to stand still and be a man.” A woman is speaking to me. She has a birdlike gaze and severity.

“A man?”

“That’s right. A man. Your momma don’t want you the way you are. That’s why she sent you here, so you can grow into a young man. Now you just get out there with the other boys and stop your sissy thing.”

Under the bright lights of the ballpark a boy bigger than me lashes a line drive over the centerfield scoreboard and runs the bases with powerful, long-legged authority.

The pickup truck is waiting for me. The key is in the ignition. As I turn it a man grabs hold of me, the same man who drove me to the camp.

“Where do you think you’re going, mister? Are you being some kind of criminal?”

“I’m going home to Momma. She needs me,” I scream.

“Your momma don’t need no vehicle thief. You ain’t going nowhere but to reform school. You hear what I’m saying? Won’t be no momma visiting you there either.”

“Please, please,” I say, but he drags me from the truck and throws me to the ground, where he pins me with a knee on my chest.

“Now you listen to me, you little sissy brat. I’ll whip you hard like nobody’s business you even so much as look at my truck again. You hear?”

“I hear Momma,” I shout into his red face. “I hear Momma screaming. I must go home. Listen. Listen.”

A police officer takes me to the bus. Half of his uniform is light brown; the other half is dark brown, in the way they do things in Missouri. He wears a large round hat to ensure that all is in order on his head.

To be a Momma in New York City in summer is to suffer the peril of the heat and sorrow over a family that has not risen to her occasion. It is to be hopeful of the power of ancient texts to heal her afflicted offspring. Because the rocks of old Jerusalem have a lot to do with a contemporary malady, and people cling to the old rugged cross so that someday they can make it their own.

The bright lights of New York City are burning and the gnashing of teeth has not yet begun. An unfettered sparrow among the movie marquees on Forty-second Street may break your heart but we will nail it to the cross soon enough, a voice is heard to say.

Garbage is piled high on the streets, the rats are king, but we are free, the people assert, running naked and sometime away from the next ablution of their formerly private parts.

If I have been exposed, then concealment cannot be mine, but to have a building to return to provides all the warmth a boy can need. A change has not taken place. The old order prevails. Chuck is in the lobby watching and drinking, doing what he can while sitting in a chair to keep the building safe with his mathematical mind in abeyance. No equation is needed for the posture of passivity, Chuck says. It is simply a matter of finding comfort for the affliction that he has and to offer a start-up voice that is loud and harsh but not obscene to go with his standup hair.

Naomi is present too, her eyes shining like obsidian glass as she bears down on me with her feminine anger. "If it isn't little Svenska pojka Flathead? Where has our boy been that he should be carrying such a suitcase?"

It is months now since she stood on the window ledge.

"Nowhere," I say, feeling her mirth like a coating of saliva on my very skin.

"That's not what Mother says. She told us you went away to some baseball camp, and that you would be gone for two weeks. And that was two days ago."

"So?" I say.

"Has little Flathead come home early? Did little Flathead miss Mommy?"

"Where is Momma? Where is she?"

"Is little Flathead calling for his momma?" Naomi goes on.

Chuck reaches down for the green pint bottle and takes a belt of wine, then gently screws the cap back on. I feel their lashing laughter as I head for the stairs.

“Be a man, for Christ’s sake. Be a man. When I was your age I was traveling the world,” Chuck calls after me.

Momma is sitting alone in the dark as I come in the front door. She sits in a chair I never see her in. It is after midnight.

“Are you here, my weak and stupid son? Have you too come to give me trouble?”

“Momma, what is it you say?” Momma wears her robe of white. Her hair is down.

“I am in pain. That is what I say. And I have no one to help me. No one. Do you understand what I say, weak and stupid boy?”

“Momma, do not talk this way.”

“Always with your freshness. All of you.”

“Momma, have you come from the hospital? Do you need to go back? What am I to do?”

“I have been to the hospital for an operation on my varicose veins. And now they want me to come back so they can do the other leg. But I will never go back. Go away now before I say more. Go, I say.”

“But Momma...”

Momma turns on the lamp light and I gasp. The sight of her bare legs has knocked me back like a blow to the chest. Like marbled meat her legs are, a bright purplish red.

“Now will you go and leave me in peace?”

“Momma,” I say, but I can’t look anymore.

Sadness has toppled the garbage can in the kitchen. Coffee grounds and gnawed meat bones and banana peels and peach pits and a slimy butter stick wrapper have spilled out on the worn-through linoleum. No, I say, no.

I am alone in my room. Luke has gone away again. The nuns have use for his mechanical abilities at their property upstate. He has become their Tall Tommy.

Oh, Momma, what have you said? Oh, Momma, what has been done?

The outfield has bald patches and the infield is hard and rocky. Boys in street clothes are playing a pickup game. The catcher has a mask but no chest protector for the hardball heaves from the lanky pitcher. No pretty ballpark with dugouts and a scoreboard and a manicured field as down in Missouri. This is Riverside Park at approximately One Hundred Eighth Street.

Atop the batting cage, right over home plate, perches Frenchie the Algerian. As each batter steps in to hit, Frenchie drops bits of something, a smile coming to Frenchie's face as the batters wince. A couple look up toward him with accusing eyes, but then quickly look away, as if they know about his power to pluck out their eyes with his thumb or to do even worse. Now a bare-chested kid with a huge, anvil-shaped head steps in and goes into his left-handed crouch, bat cocked, handle aligned with his ears. Suddenly he drops his bat and swats his neck, as if he had just been stung by a bee, then looks up and sees the smilingly malevolent face of Frenchie the Algerian. But this boy is not like the other boys. His face, with its permanent scowl, makes him appear older than the other kids, and his hairy, muscular body is more developed than theirs. Instantly, like an enraged tiger, he is scaling the batting cage. As he does, Frenchie scurries down the other

side of the cage, picks up a bat, and awaits his pursuer near the pitcher's mound. But the man-boy has no dawdle dance in him. Frenchie the Algerian's bat is no kind of deterrent. Frenchie swings and misses and Man-Boy hits Frenchie a shot to the face that separates him from the bat. Man-Boy hits him two more shots that sends Frenchie tottering around the infield before he collapses out by second base. For Man-Boy the game is over. He finds his shirt and walks off, his head back at a forty-five degree angle to the sky.

“Fucking Sean. Don't be fucking with The Head. Know what I fucking mean, Jim?”

“Best believe I know what you mean.” another boy says. “That boy don't *play*. That boy is *serious*.”

Oh yes, I think. Oh yes.

The Broadway Presbyterian Church offers vacation Bible school and a musty smell, but the more compelling sound is the basketball that booms in the gymnasium below. Screens have been placed over the stained glass windows and the pastor has been asked to leave for putting a monkey in the trunk of his car, someone has said.

And that block just north of my own has other features. It has the Wentworth boys, Eric and Jeff, who read and read and for whom the world is waiting. The quality of their beauty is there in the names they have been given, and so I am shy enough among them that I can only say hello.

And in the building on the southwest corner of Broadway where they live with their mother (no father has been allowed into the house) a woman, old and white, leans

out of her window on the floor above and shouts down to the street that she is dying and yet never felt so good.

And across the street, by the Esso filling station and garage, zoom zoom Bobby Cassandro has a look of joyful delirium on his smiling face as he banters with the uniformed attendants. Bobby Cassandro has done no harm to the earth in being born simple, and so the attendants are tender with him in their manly way. How cool the garage feels. How potent the smell of rubber and gas and oil are. He laps the block with his head tilted, making the vroom vroom sound of a car motor as he goes. No one will ever kill him dead without having to answer for it.

Columbia University has guards in mailman gray to patrol its walkways and secure its premises from the non-university horde. In years past we have fired roman candles in their direction as they approached to send us on our way. There is one coming now up the Low Library steps, past the spewing twin fountains on the plaza. We do not say, “Chickie, the fuzz, chickie the fuzz” but remain in place. Jerry Jones Nobleonian stands firm. Johnny too stands firm and has something to say. His words are revolutionary. They throw open the doors of my mind and place a rope around my neck that leads me where it will.

“He’s queer. He likes to suck boys’ dicks.” Johnny says his name is Louie, and so now I have no choice but to be a part of him, this old man with the balding head and slow-motion way of walking. Johnny does not know the gift he has made, and it is for me to conceal the sexual fireworks going on within. Oh have I walked the earth so long that my love should now appear.

Nighttime offers the crack of thunder and bolts of lightning. The heavens open up and the earth is one big flood. Still, I do not need a boat for where I am going, but walk on sneakered feet. The great Butler Library on the Columbia campus is closed; its books are not for you to know till morning comes. Herodotus. Demosthenes. Plato. All the names on the pediment you will have to wait until morning to read.

Above the Alma Mater stairs squats the Low Library. The angled brick footpaths will take you there. Louie stands alone, his head a rival to the library's dome. A prayer begins. Oh father, lead me into the corridor of darkness I am seeking. Take me where I have never been. Do not let me die here on the stake of my desire.

Now does Louie hear me. Now does he brim with his own desire. Oh do I see it seep from his pores and his fallen-in mouth. Oh do I see the promise of all things to come in the slowness of his implacable pace.

Louie comes with keys and displays his power to turn the lock in the formidable brass door. He whispers to me, "Let's go," and I dart through, allowing the darkness of the library to swallow me, my sneakered feet making a sound of squishy wetness on the marble floor. And now does his flashlight lead to an inner sanctum, another door where the marble ends and a carpet begins. We are in an office with a desk and a banker's lamp and a shelf of books. Now do my shirt and jeans and everything come off that I may lie down on that carpet, allowing my nakedness to be seen in the beam of Louie's flashlight.

Louie loosens his black belt, causing his pants to fall down all around him. What a heavy blanket is his weight. And how filthy his body where he would have me go.

Louie has coins for me when he is done. Two quarters does he give me to remember him by. Through the darkness does he lead me. It is good when the confines of

the library have fallen away and I can run to the freedom I now am seeking, running far, far from Louie and who he is and who I am that I am with him. My insides burn and burn. Now is my flesh dependent on the cleansing water I am seeking. Now must I throw the coins where no one will know they have ever been a part of me. Now must I be behind another closed door to wash away my sin.

Part Two
A New Start

From the yard below come screams and shouts and the sound of a ball bounding off the chain-link fence. Dodge ball, my classmates are playing, as the sun overhead burns bright in a cloudless early September sky. If I am not with them, it is that I need to be alone during recess and take stock. A new school. A new uniform. A new start. Yes, that is what it is. A new start. I am afraid but also excited. It is not even that. I feel this peace, this stillness, as if I have been removed from a battleground to a place of calm.

I had begun to worry. Momma heard my ache of longing for structure more than could be found at the chaotic Molodon School. Momma wants to spare me the failure gulch into which some of us have fallen already: Hannah, now thirty-one, still living at home, though Momma may not regard that as the failure I do; Naomi's daily life of apathy and pills and suicide attempts and dependency on Momma for her survival; and those storm warnings that have been posted for Rachel, who dropped out of Vassar two weeks before her graduation.

“Pride goeth before the fall. Do you know what I mean when I say that about your sister Rachel, my little Flathead?” Naomi asks.

“I don't know anything you mean,” I say, stiffening against this sister of mine.

“Your sister learned she would not be graduating with honors. Her studies are all she has. She has no friends. She has no *man*. The man she had got away, just like Judy

Garland said he would. Do you know I could have been the second Judy Garland? Do you, little Flathead?"

"Sure I do," I say. How my sister talks, from her poison place of deep iniquity, if I am to live in the language of sin of Momma and Pastor Cohn.

"Momma says I am the instrument of Rachel's demise. She says I got her started on amphetamines. Do you know what amphetamines are, little Flathead?"

"No," I say.

"Amphetamines are God in the form of a pill. They make you feel like God should make you feel but doesn't have the time to. I take them during the day and go way, way up and have a few drinks at night to cushion the fall. Yummy yum yum."

One afternoon the year before, Rachel weeping in the lobby as Momma held her. She had come from Vassar to be at Barnard College for her junior year. But the man she had followed after left her, just as Naomi said. The world didn't want Rachel as much as I had thought it did. She didn't have what it was looking for. She was too plain. She was too something.

That same year she took me down Broadway some blocks to the apartment of one of her professors. She owed him a term paper. He came to the door and thanked her for the paper but did not ask us in. I have an older sister. She is walking with me, I thought, that night.

The family sings "Happy Birthday." Even Naomi and Rachel sing "Dear Gideon," not "Dear Flathead." A coconut lemon cake, soft and moist and with that tart lemon flavor. Socks. A tie. A shirt. Gifts do they have for me.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Rachel asks.

I feel put on the spot. Is there a right answer? “I want to be a skin diver,” I blurt, having seen one on TV recently.

“Aren’t all men skin divers?” Rachel’s quickness and smiling ferocity startle me. I have no answer.

My father is not there to answer either. He is at the church garage in Astoria with the other men of the Christ Jesus.

“I want you all to know that I read at least five books a week,” Miss Flowers, our English teacher, says. “If you are to be la crème de la crème, then you too must read. You must develop a passion for literature. You must hear the prose of our great writers singing on the page.”

We have spelling bees and vocabulary tests. Words like *zephyr*, *obsequious*, *diphtheria*. We learn the difference between *compliment* and *complement*. We learn that there is *there* and there is *their* and that they are homonyms.

“But you must not read *The Catcher in the Rye*. It is a monstrous book, monstrous. It defies the norms of decency and is the work of a fraud, a writer with a conspicuously inferior mind.”

Sometimes Miss Flowers disappears, not for a day, but for several weeks. A nervous breakdown, someone whispers. Miss Flowers alone somewhere in a room and shaking, like an out-of-control machine with no off switch that vibrates so violently its bolts come loose. A room in which she sits looking different, hardly human, not with her

blond hair all perfect and all that carefully applied makeup. A dark part of her that can take over at any time, even in front of us.

On a rainy, late-summer day, Momma had brought me to the school for an interview with the headmistress, a woman named Miss Iris who wore her gray hair in a bun and tucked her used tissue up her sleeve. Miss Iris ticked off the titles of a number of books: *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, *Penrod*, *The Ox-Bow Incident*. Had I read any of them? I shook my head no to each one.

“And what exactly have you read?” Miss Iris said, looking at me over the bifocals she wore looped around her neck.

“Comic books. *Batman*. *Superman*.”

“Comic books?”

“He is a good boy,” Momma said.

Some days later Momma sent me to see a Miss Blum. This time I went alone.

Miss Blum lived near the Museum of Natural History on the West side of Manhattan. She asked me questions and had me repeat back to her strings of numbers. The second part was harder. Miss Blum would show me a print of black and white blocks arranged in certain patterns and then ask me to replicate those patterns with the actual blocks in front of me on the table. Or she would ask me to assemble wooden pieces of a puzzle. A terrible anger grew in me, such as I would display with Momma when she fumbled for my correct name. Miss Blum was trying to hurt me, to thwart me. My feelings began to run along this line. I wanted to smash things and smash her and smash myself.

“That’s a very difficult one,” she said, assembling one set of pieces into the figure of an elephant. But her words, which were meant to comfort me, were not persuasive. She had seen exactly what I had seen. I was not good enough and had never been good enough. I was as meager mentally as I was physically. The experience shook and shamed me, that Miss Blum should see me as I truly was.

Nevertheless the school accepted me, my verbal ability being sufficient to offset other limitations. Or maybe the school was merely desperate for boys, as girls were in the majority, at least in my grade.

If I have been disruptive and unruly before, here at Claremont I will be as buttoned down as the white Oxford shirts I wear each day to school. It will not do to continue my old ways. Watchful eyes are upon me. There must be no false moves. No more throwing erasers or spitballs or instigating classmates to run helter-skelter through the streets of Manhattan in flight from our teacher.

In my textbooks I inscribe “Gideon is great.” The words just come, demanding to be written, and with a feeling of great joy, I do just that. During English class I show the inscription to the girl seated at the next desk, who gasps and covers her mouth to stifle her laughter. After the class, she does not say to me, “What did you mean writing such a thing?” or “That is amazing.” There was only that gasp as she placed her hand over her mouth.

Tall and lanky Ogden Connifer has a bullet head and buzz-cut hair. He does not write in his books that he is great. He simply says, with a smile that reveals his big teeth, “I am

the brightest boy in our grade.” Ogden is the son of a professor of English at Columbia University, and so can recognize intelligence when he sees it.

On weekday mornings he can be seen bending down to pick up trash from the sidewalk on Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue as he walks to school. Used tissues, discarded magazines, candy wrappers—he deposits this litter in a nearby garbage can, and shows no self-consciousness as he goes about his tidying task. If others laugh, he does not seem to mind, relying on his vision of a world where order reigns to keep him going.

Ogden lives on Riverside Drive, in walking distance of Columbia University, in a building that is known for its order. Many of my other classmates have East Side addresses—Fifth Avenue, Madison Avenue, Park Avenue, Sutton Place—and have fathers who are doctors and lawyers and CEOs of large corporations. They too obviously come from houses of order. If asked by a classmate where I live, I answer with a general vicinity, simply saying the Upper West Side. Though rare, such questions leave me stricken with terror too strong for the power of reason: the unsightly apartment, the spectacle that Naomi and Chuck make of themselves, the religiosity on full display with that verse of scripture on the side of the building. No and no and no again. No one will ever get through and hurt me like Johnny Lacy and Edward Macy did. Never.

But maybe the Claremont School is not good enough. At St. Andrews, we had been required to take French and Latin, but Claremont has no such requirement. And everyone has heard of Trinity and the Collegiate School, two famous prep schools only blocks away, but who has ever heard of us? Is it possible I have come aboard the Texas Special,

which runs on 027 gauge track, while others have boarded the glorious Santa Fe and are flying along on Super-O?

It is a *halcyon* day.

“Science has proven that a kiss takes five minutes off a human being’s life. But who could possibly care?” So says Gresham Dodger, tall and handsome, who has made Susan Springer, the prettiest girl in the class, all his.

Gresham Dodger lives in a brownstone somewhere close by. The whole building does his family live in. He has an older brother *Rhoden* who is now at Harvard and another older brother *Colin* who is studying at Yale. And his father is an inventor with many patents in his name.

Charles Blatstein is not Gresham Dodger and will never kiss Susan Springer. Charles Blatstein is a bottom dweller. He tells me that someday he will go to the Bronx High School of Science, a special public school for gifted students who score high on the entrance exam. Over and over does he tell me this same thing. The face he shows me is that of an old man with a sprawling nose and small, angry eyes too close together. Flecks of food, caught in the massive wiring in his mouth, can be seen as he speaks. Like a small, pugnacious dog is Charles Blatstein.

Charles Blatstein will go on to the Bronx High School of Science and become great, while I have already proclaimed myself to be great. A nobody has found a nobody.

“What’s the matter? You don’t believe me? Just because you’re a stupid blockhead doesn’t mean everybody is.”

I swing my fist, striking Charles on his right ear, just as Gresham Dodger appears in the doorway. Seeing the shot I have given the now howling Charles, whose hand has gone to his smarting ear, Gresham rushes over. From his greater height, Gresham shouts down at me, “We don’t do that here. We don’t do that here.” Some great moral outrage seems to propel his words, as if he is seeking to angle them into my consciousness. The intensity of his gaze and message prevent me from any argument. Gresham Dodger is telling me something. He is instructing me. He is saying that wherever I have come from, I am not there now. Gresham Dodger is my teacher. He has not spoken to me before, and he will speak to me again. But he is speaking to me now.

Mr. Gladwell has a silver flask he nips from behind closed doors. The smell of alcohol competes with wintergreen on his breath. His skin is scaly and inflamed and a permanent quiver afflicts his face and hands, a problem that is especially noticeable when he tries to write figures on the blackboard. But Mr. Gladwell will not have things flying apart in his mechanical drawing class. A smart tone of voice from Ogden Connifer sends a piece of chalk whizzing at the rude one’s head. Order and respect are due. Let the class be aware it is dealing with an incendiary device, Mr. Gladwell is saying.

“Quiet. Mr. Shaky’s coming,” a boy named Freddy Snyder whispers, his words greeted by laughter.

Mr. Shaky. Mr. Glug Glug.

Tiny Mr. Valfeades maintains a peacock strut, wearing a different jacket for every day of the week and jackets of varying weights to match the season. And then there are those

days when he appears before us in an elegant suit. Always do his ties glow against a backdrop of shirts that are one day green or yellow and the next red or royal blue or luminously white. His personal grooming is impeccable: lustrous black hair neatly trimmed and parted, white teeth that glisten, and skin smooth and bronzed in even the harshest winter weather. Mr. Valfeades is a man of order, applying a careful selection process even to his shoes and socks.

“I come from Pawtucket, Rhode Island. How many of you know that Pawtucket was the site of the first factory in this country? Not one of you? Then we have a lot to learn.”

Our American history textbook sings a song of endless progress. Lexington and Concord and Minutemen. Bluecoats and Redcoats and Hessians. The Erie Canal and Antietam and Gettysburg and Bull Run. Washington and Jefferson and Lincoln. Such a loud and happy song in my ears that I am an American boy.

Now when Momma calls me into the bathroom and closes the door, it is not to look into my mind and open my hand for the money I have taken but to pull from her stuffed red leather bag an envelope and remove from it my report card. “English, A. French, A. History, A. Mechanical drawing, A-. Do you see the joy you are bringing to me, my son? Do you?” Momma says, reading from the watermarked stationery.

It is not for me to stay in that confined space, amid the sour-smelling towels. I must break away and be alone with my joy. I must not have it shared too long with anyone, not even Momma.

A pie-faced girl with the heavy weight of sorrow on it has, with a soft voice, invited me to her party. Because I cannot say no, I say yes to Susan Piner's invitation, though the alarm bell is ringing loud within me. If I go to her party, then she will have to come to mine, and that can never be. But it is more than that. Susan Piner has asked me to join her in her sadness that we have niceness and amiability to offer the world and nothing more. For this reason too must I stay away.

Friday is Human Day, when I can be free of the blue blazer and charcoal gray slacks that Momma has bought to cover my bones, and the girls can be free from their white blouses and plaid or gray skirts. School lets out at noon, and I can go to Johnny's Pizzeria on Broadway and Ninety-fourth Street for a chewy slice. Or while the weather is still warm, I can order a ham and American cheese hero, with lettuce and tomato and mustard, at the Ta-Kome Deli on the northwest corner of One Hundred Fifteenth Street and Broadway and walk down to Riverside Park, where I can sit and drink my Coca-Cola and eat my hero sandwich with no book to read or person to talk to as an intrusion on my happiness. There I can just sit and soak in the greenery and the river beyond and the blue sky and brilliant sun, knowing that a railroad of America is under this park and that I am part of something bigger than I can ever know.

Later in the afternoon, I head downtown on the subway to the tabernacle for Friday afternoon Bible school, as Momma still wants nothing to take me away from the Lord.

"Nothing," Momma says, and says it loud.

And in this time, Momma also says, “You must promise me not to breathe a word, but Hannah is big with child.”

“But who will the father be?” I ask. Hannah goes about as if she has a pillow under her dress.

“Do not ask such a question of me, and especially do not ask such a question of Hannah, lest you set off an explosion heard around the world. Hannah is very private. You must respect that. You must.”

“But Momma, where is the baby going to live?”

“The baby will live where he or she can breathe, the way that all babies should be allowed to live.”

“Live and breathe where, Momma? Hannah lives in a single room.”

“Have you not heard a single thing at the tabernacle all these years? Have you not heard ‘Away in a manger/No crib for a bed/The little Lord Jesus/Lay down his sweet head?’”

“But Momma, Hannah doesn’t have a manger. She has a room.”

“Do you not see how the Indians live in our building, sometimes four to a room? Is two the same as four?”

Momma so full of her own understanding.

“His name is Moses,” Hannah said. “Do not call him Mo or anything short of his full name. Is that understood? And if you touch him, touch him respectfully. I will be watching, even when I’m not there. I think you know what I mean. And if I have power, you have no idea the power he will wield and the smacks he will deliver when he is of

age. Remember my words, Gideon. Remember them. My son's time is coming and no one deprives my son."

The baby boy is silent and assessing in his mother's arms. No gurgling tot is he. I feel the two of them drinking in my fear and Hannah thinking, Just when you thought my power was waning, suddenly it has grown.

"Why do you say these things?"

"Why did you have to be born with the fresh mouth that you have?"

"What fresh mouth?"

"Are you scared now? Are you?" Hannah asks.

I don't answer her. I don't have to.

Jerry and his family have moved out of the hotel of the Negroes. They have gone twelve blocks, an eternity, to a fifth-floor apartment in a walkup building. A Cademy 2-5565 is the number he stands on should I wish to reach him. If there is brutality on his block, it does not live in his building. The remorseless violence of the street sings its sudden shrieking song, knives and baseball bats used to perish foes from the earth, some of it in full sight of Jerry, sickening him to a place where he can barely speak. "I mean it was like he was swinging at a fastball, taking a real hard cut. And not once, but over and over. I don't know, man. I don't know." Jerry crying at the horror of what he had seen after one man wielding an Adirondack Slugger trapped his victim and did his obliterating thing as we walk in the refuge of greenery in the lower drive of Riverside Park.

But now, fast approaching in the company of a large friend, is the man child with the hammer head who pulverized Frenchie the Algerian down on the baseball diamond

the year before, making clear that it is he in whom all power resides. As if words can be dispensed with, we wrestle with the two of them. Rolling down the hill we go, where the man child easily pins me. But no pummeling action follows. He does not cave in my chest or my head and speaks no words, as if only shyness can follow such an impulsive physical act. His friend has made quick work of Jerry as well. And then they are gone, just like that. Gone.

“Was that a dream?” I ask.

“That was real, man. That was real,” Jerry says, brushing the dirt from his clothes.

Luigi Santibelli has also gone away, vacating the basement shop where he had been the sun itself. He says he is done with the “old pussy,” as he continues to call Auntie Eve. He is not Tall Tommy or Little Tommy or any of the other men in the single rooms whom Momma and Auntie Eve call upon to keep the building standing. He has found a store over on Eighty-fourth Street and First Avenue with a living space at the back.

Luigi’s face shows darkness, not the light, when Luke and I stand in the doorway of his new domain.

“We’re doing fine. We just came by to see you,” Luke says.

“I’m a busy now. I no gotta the time.”

“But we just came to say hello,” Luke says.

“I tella you I no gotta the time,” Luigi says, his face transformed by anger.

We walk south, down toward Seventy-second Street. “He didn’t have to talk to us that way,” Luke says.

“But he did,” I say.

“All I’m saying is that he didn’t *have to* talk to us like that.”

“He was busy,” I say.

“He wasn’t busy. He just hated the sight of us.”

“He liked us when we were kids. He doesn’t like us so much now that we are older.”

“What?”

“I think so. I think that’s what his face was saying.”

“Yeah? You think so? What kind of shit is that?”

“I don’t know. That’s what I saw.”

“You saw. You saw. Fuck him. I’m hungry. You want to grab a slice of pizza?”

“Yeah, I’d like some pizza,” I say.

“Let’s get some pizza,” Luke says.

“What kind of name is that, Garatdjian?” my classmate Freddy Snyder asks in that first year. Thick glasses. A nose like a parrot’s beak. He seems to have the answer right there in his mocking, incredulous smile.

“My father is Armenian.”

“What’s that, Armenian?” His voice booms.

“They’re just people.”

“People, did you hear what Garatdj just said? Armenians. They’re just people.”

Freddy Snyder laughs and laughs, showing all the wiring in his expensive mouth.

“Come on. Leave Garatdj alone,” Gresham Dodger says.

“I’m just asking Garatdj a question, that’s all. Armenians. Are they like Indians? What are they?”

“They’re whatever you say they are,” I say.

“What kind of answer is that?” Freddy contiues.

“Leave Garatdj alone.”

“But I was just asking him a question.”

“No you weren’t,” Gresham says.

Once again the men who drive with one hand on the steering wheel lean up against their double-parked cars outside the tabernacle. They have come in the summer heat to take us away from Pennsylvania Station and Macy’s and the General Post Office and the life we know on the streets of Manhattan. Stinky Maldonado is there and Eddie Goyco and Reuben Alvado and Willie Peterson and Peanuts Kozinski and Kenny and Johnny Jones and the rest.

Bob Pellalugra and his wife, Hosanna, are waiting for us when the cars arrive at camp. Within a week his lightning bolt of righteousness has struck again after an excavation of my dresser drawer, in which he unearthed a pack of Marlboro cigarettes and a book of matches. “What are these?” he thunders, holding the red and white box in his hand.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? You don’t know?”

“They’re cigarettes.”

“And what were they doing in your dresser? You don’t know that either?”

“No. I don’t know.”

“They just flew in the window?”

“I can’t say.”

Bob Pellalugra has gathered the children for his inquisition on an overcast afternoon outside the cabin. Earlier the sun had been bright in the sky, but the clouds form fast in the mountains, and once they come, they do not leave for the rest of the day.

“‘I can’t say,’ the liar says. Who makes him lie?” Bob Pellalugra has turned to the kids but no one answers. “Is the devil in this boy who smokes and lies?”

“I didn’t smoke any cigarettes. The pack is unopened.”

“But you brought them here to smoke them. Why else would you have brought them?”

“I didn’t smoke any cigarettes.”

Bob Pellalugra raises his tattooed right arm and knocks me down with a blow to the side of the head, then drags me up the cabin stairs and tosses me in my room. “Stay here, Satan. Stay here. And if you don’t, I’ll beat the devil right out of you.”

The same longing for Momma that afflicts me every summer has come again. But then, one morning, wandering with the other boys down by the creek, something changes. Some of the girls have come along too, having nothing else to do, and soon a new and strange door opens and the boys are kissing the girls and the girls are kissing the boys and once it starts, it does not stop. First it is one girl and then another arrives.

The camp I had wanted to leave, I now never want to leave.

Darkness falls and voices rise in song in the cool mountain air: “Shall We Gather at the River,” “In the Garden,” “Blessed Assurance.” Pastor Chernenko, his tie loosened and his jacket doffed, has found a rhythm with his fiery words. His round face slick with sweat, he beckons the boys and girls to the prayer rail, that we may kneel and acknowledge our sinfulness and invite the Christ Jesus into our hearts. But the dark night is suddenly calling. En masse, we bolt out the door, leaving behind the startled adult remnant of the flock. Down through the high grass and into the meadow we streak, screaming and shrieking under the full moon, boys falling on the rubber-lipped girls, all of us kissing and kissing some more while after us come Bob Pellulugra and his wife, Hosanna, thwacking the bushes and filling the air with angry threats, and behind them Pastor Chernenko himself, in a more pleading tone, saying, “Children, children, come home to the Lord. Come home to the Lord,” while from the tabernacle atop the hill floats the sound of adult voices singing “Bringing in the Sheaves.”

The rubber basketball bounces off the perforated metal backboard and through the netless rim. From the same spot, at the top of the key, I try again, giving several head fakes before springing in the air, but the next four are all off-line. I am number 44, Jerry West, of the West Virginia Mountaineers—Zeke from Cabin Creek—but Jerry West's shots generally hit nothing but net.

Beyond the chain-link fence, cars rip past on the West Side Highway and a tanker has dropped anchor in the Hudson River, where used rubbers float at full extension in the rank, polluted water.

Five full-length asphalt basketball courts have been laid out, and on the farthest one I watch as another boy takes aim at a metal hoop. Even from a distance I recognize him as from the grade below at the Claremont School. Waves of fear pass through me at the sighting of the boy, and yet my feet take me in the boy's direction, one court after another.

He is a handsome boy, his hair shaggy and blond and longer than Momma will ever let mine be. Tall and gangly, he is brave to wear shorts and expose such white, skinny legs.

We play a few games of Horse and a game of one-on-one. Neither of us had a jump shot; we can't elevate beyond the thickness of a Manhattan phone book. When we part ways, I cling to a small sense of superiority, having come out on top.

We meet some days later on the same court. "So where do you live?" Tom Smits asks.

"Not so far from here," I say, and changed the subject.

"Where is that, not so far from here?" By now Tom has disclosed his Riverside Drive address, making him, in my mind, another boy with an immaculate apartment. And there is a second home, in Vermont, and the position his father holds as chairman of the art history department at Brooklyn College. And there is his mother, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Columbia University, and his younger sister, blessed with a photographic memory.

"A few blocks. Near Broadway."

Fall and winter come, driving us indoors. Weekday nights we go to Madison Square Garden, down on Eighth Avenue and Fiftieth Street, to see pro basketball

doubleheaders. When the visiting Boston Celtics take the court, my eyes are on Bob Cousy, number 14, with his behind-the-back dribbling and full court passes. Or on Tommy Heinsohn, the Celtic forward with the flattop haircut, who releases his jumpers from over his right shoulder, contemptuously slinging the ball at the basket. The Celtics wear kelly green, the Knicks anemic white with orange trim. I see Cousy and Heinsohn and Frank Ramsay and Paul Scharman, and then I see my fear: Negro Bill Russell, their goateed center, and the Negro guards Sam and K.C. Jones. The Negro Boston Celtics will someday outnumber the white Boston Celtics, as someday Negroes will outnumber whites in the general population, with all the consequences that will have for me personally: unbridled anger and endless beatings and the mayhem of welfare hotels rife throughout the city. "The Jones Boys" must never surpass little Bob Cousy.

"Bill Russell is the Celtics' most valuable player. He could play with four dwarves and they would still win," Tom Smits says, after Russell deflects a shot by the Knicks' skinny forward Kenny Sears out toward Sam Jones, who races down the court and banks in a jumper.

"Russell doesn't score," I say, of the towering Celtics' center with the number six on his back.

"He doesn't have to. He controls the entire game. Defensive rebounding, outlet passes, shot-blocking that moves the Knick's offense farther and farther from the rim."

Tom Smits does not count the number of Negroes in the starting lineup of the Boston Celtics or identify with the whiteness of his skin and the blondness of his hair or harbor in his bones the fear that *they are coming, they are coming*.

A haze of cigar and cigarette smoke hangs over the arena, stinging our eyes and fouling our clothes as we watch the stars at night: not only magical Cousy with his behind-the-back passing and set shot but Wilt the Stilt and Paul Arizin and Elgin Baylor with the beautiful name and the twitch in his neck who can hang in the air as if suspended, and Bob Pettit, who never makes a wasted move from his post-up position, and Hal Greer and Dick “fall back, baby, fall back” Barnett and Dolph Schayes. And we see the complete stiffs too, like Ray Felix, the seven foot center for the New York Knicks. And the names of the players—Zelmo Beatty and Sihugo Green, and of the teams—the Chicago Bulls, the St. Louis Hawks, the Minneapolis Lakers, the Detroit Pistons, the Cincinnati Royals, the Syracuse Nationals, formerly the Rochester Nationals.

And it is Tom Smits who has brought this thing into my life that is not shoplifting or riding the subways all day long.

But the clock runs out, ending our focus on the action on the varnished hardwood floor far below, and now it is only Tom and me, my fear growing as the subway makes one local stop after another. Things would be easier if Tom got off at One Hundred Third Street rather than One Hundred Tenth Street. He would have one less block to walk, since he lives on One Hundred Sixth Street. But he doesn't. He just has to hang on, as if he senses my discomfort. Surfacing on Broadway, I avoid looking up at the verse of scripture on the wall of the building so he will not look up as well and make an intuitive connection between me and my family and the sign. And when, to my horror, I see Naomi coming out of the nearby bar, I just say a fast goodbye and we go our separate ways.

“You do have a telephone, don’t you?” Tom says.

“Sure. Sure I do.”

“So what’s the number?”

“University 4-5700. That’s the number,” I say.

“Aren’t you going to ask me for my number?” Tom says.

“Sure. I’ll ask for it.”

Tom looks at me, puzzled. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“I’ll ask for it’ isn’t the same thing as asking for it.”

“Okay, so what is it?”

ACademy 2-9947. But just because I have the number doesn’t mean I have to use it.

“It is that nice boy Tom on the phone for you,” Momma says, when Tom is on the line. Tom in my life makes her heart happy. She wants me out of immigrant shadows and in the bright sunlight of America, and Tom offers proof that I am moving in the right direction. A small, harmless breach, I told myself at first, Tom Smits calling me at home to ask me to come along to basketball games at Madison Square Garden. After all, he can’t see into my home through the telephone. But I do not like Tom’s calls. They do not cause my heart to swell with happiness. All I feel is fear and tension lest Tom hear my family in the background and ask sharp, probing questions or squash me with mocking laughter, as I suspect Tom’s real purpose to eventually be.

If I cannot give Tom my apartment, so Tom can go hah hah hah, I can give him indoor basketball courts when cold comes to drive us from the outdoor courts in

Riverside Park. But a problem exists here, too. The gyms I know about are at Columbia University and Teacher's College and Riverside Church, north of where I live. It will not do to meet Tom Smits at the halfway point between our two buildings (*Not so far from here. I live not so far from here.*) That would mean meeting south of where I live and then walking north with him past my block. Such reckless stupidity could only be rewarded with Tom Smits laughing at Momma in her funny men's shoes and rubber stockings and looking down at Naomi and Chuck, who might well be drunk, and—no, no, we must not have this. We must not have this, as Momma says.

And so there is nothing to do but to meet on the safe ground of Chock Full O' Nuts on One Hundred Sixteenth Street and Broadway, because nobody but nobody can laugh at Chock Full O' Nuts, seeing that Columbia people go there all the time for their nudded cheese sandwiches and on Fridays tuna fish sandwiches and clam chowder soup, and those wonderful cream pies the chain serves all days of the week except Sunday, when they are closed. Chock Full O' Nuts has no blemish of family upon it. It has no mismatched furniture you can point to and put your laugh upon. It just has the order and the cleanliness of its ways.

"The heck with Chock Full O' Nuts. I'll come over to your apartment. We'll meet there," Tom says, unwilling to pretend he hasn't seen my fear.

"I'll meet you there," I say, meaning Chock Full, as if I hadn't heard. Because to have heard is to engage Tom in a discussion, and there is nothing to discuss. Nothing.

In a building on the Columbia campus we descend to the basement and pass through a maze of long, narrow passageways lined from floor to ceiling with thick horizontal pipes wrapped in padding cinched with metal bands. Now and then a worker

appears in dark blue workpants and shirt or we hear the shouted voices of workers, but no adult voice barks, "Hey, you two, where do you think you are going?" And yet to know that any moment one sharp command can bring to an end my dream of making a gift to Tom Smits of the part of my world that is respectable to show and that will not unleash the hah hah hah.

Through a small door we pass Far below lies a tightly organized space with forest green generators and ramps and walkways. Down the enclosed spiral metal staircase we make our way. The generators whirl with frightening power as we come to another door. There, on the other side, lies a gleaming hardwood floor and fiber-glass backboards and hoops with white nets, not unadorned metal rims, attached to them.

"Amazing." Tom marvels, from the place of generosity that he possesses, and I bask in his approval, even as I sense that Tom's way to be in violation of the law or to trespass on private property. And so there is this qualm that I have led Tom Smits where he truly does not belong.

Alone, with only the sound of our squeaking sneakers and the bouncing ball echoing off the floor and the backboard, I can dream of one day what might come to be.

"The underground man. That is what I am going to call you from now on," Tom Smits says.

"The beast is seeking to rise from its clammy depths, oozing sickness and malignancy. There must be an interdiction. His diseased cargo must meet its end in the oily depths from which it would emerge. At this very moment, under one of the world's great oceans, is a tunnel being built to facilitate the cardinals in their exultant trek from their Vatican

home in Rome to the seat of power in our great nation's capital. So, my brothers and sisters, I ask you: Will we beat back this iniquity with the power of Jesus or will we live in enslavement to the forces of darkness operating from Rome?"

Interdic-*shun*, as if Pastor Cohn would hide for all time in that last syllable.

"I am not political," Ogden Connifer hisses. I have asked him which candidate he favors, Richard Milhous Nixon or John Fitzgerald Kennedy. The filth of the world have I clearly brought to his doorstep that he should rebuke me such vehemence.

"Don't you know the cardinals are coming? The tunnel is being built and they may be walking through it right now?"

Ogden Connifer's face shows smiling contempt. He is telling me something, as Gresham Dodger told me something. He is telling me to look, look at the premises of my mind, but to look with his eyes that I might see the chains that have me bound. And if only for a moment I do, I do, that the campaign should cause such fear in me and none in him.

ACademy 2-5545. Jerry-Jones Nobleonian's phone number has the solidity of his body.

His sister, Lorraine, meets me at the door, her eyes so big and all-seeing as my eyes go to her chest. In her jeans and tight T-shirt, she shows what a body can do to those who see it. I want to lie down with her full lips and her breasts straining against her tight T-shirt. I want to lie down with her copper-colored skin, which has suffered none of the violent explosions of pink that are seen on her brother's face and body.

Lorraine says nothing, not with her eyes seeing what they see.

The Hotel Commodore rises down the block from where the trains run forever into and from Grand Central Station. Jerry and I go to it by way of the subway to Times Square and then the one-stop shuttle that never fails to reach its destination beneath the terminal. The New York Central is Republican. The granite structure of the terminal building is Republican. And the store at street level below the Commodore has Republican operatives who have stocked it with the insignia of Republican power.

With flashers pinned to our jacket alternately showing the faces of Nixon and Henry Cabot Lodge, his running mate, we stand among the tall buildings reaching into our baskets for badges for the men in wool overcoats and fedoras as they rush with their attaché cases toward the terminal in a mass end-of-day exodus. Henry Cabot Lodge. Massachusetts. Our Colonial past. Harvard. A man who had to be the best of the best, with that distinguished gray hair.

Some toss coins in the basket and even dollar bills, awakening in us a hunger for more.

We head uptown, along rain-slick Madison Avenue, and move indoors, to the Roosevelt Hotel, on Forty-Fifth Street. Through the ornate lobby, thick with bellhops, we head to the mezzanine, where men in suits and women in evening gowns lounge on plush chairs, to the plainer upper floors. Silver-haired men in giant cummerbunds answer our knocks, men here with their wives from Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Wichita, Kansas, and Shaker Heights, Ohio, eager to step out and experience the Great White Way. Into their pockets they reach for coins and draw bills from their wallets in exchange for the badges we offer, transactions rushed and frenetic, so as not to throw off their evening plans. One

saying, “Honey, do we have any change lying around for these wonderful kids? Never mind. Here, guys, take this.”

That night, our pockets bulging with coins and dollar bills, I have to hold my pants up as we head home.

On the northeast corner of Amsterdam Avenue a black and white sign hangs over a diner: “Hamburger, 5 cents.” It is a sign for me to keep my eye on, as it says that economy exists. The people who go there are Hispanic and have poverty in their bones, and I imagine knives emerging heated from their boiling veins. The brownstones and other small, adjoining buildings all along the side streets from Broadway east to Central Park house them. It is an area in which I must mind my Ps and Qs, make emotional adjustments to reduce the threat of violence, and feel only anger for those of my male classmates in their crested blue blazers who invite the wrath of the neighborhood with their raised voices and brash ways, ignoring the reality that they must recognize the threat to be safe from it. To walk about free and uninhibited is grounds for punishment. The danger level is especially high when passing the public junior high school just across the street from Claremont. I should know.

“Yo, pussy. Yo, faggot. You looking at me wrong, baby? You want a punch in the mouth? You want to come over here and suck my dick? How about you give me five dollars or I cut your heart out? Yeah, you motherfucker, with that box for a head.”

This is the school that Jerry Jones-Nobleonian attends, and there is no Gresham Dodger to say, “We don’t do this here. We don’t do this here.”

A box for a head? No one makes mention of my head at the Claremont School. Not one word. Still, I continue to sit in the back row as a precaution, lest others behind me study my head and note its peculiar flatness and think of names to call me. It would not do to have to feel their eyes upon me and be unable to think of anything but their fixed focus. A hand mirror gives me a view of it as I stand in front of the medicine chest mirror in the bathroom at home. As flat as the sheerest cliff. Brutally lacking in contour. I look at the beautiful, round heads of the other boys. Even Charles has a nice round head. Every time I hope to see something different, but the flatness remains, harshly uncompromising.

As the end of eighth grade nears, school yearbooks are issued. The captions under the photos all begin, "We wish for him" or "We wish for her." For Gresham Dodger the wish is for a dazzling career as an artist. For Ogden Connifer, the wish is for a professorship at Yale. For Susan Springer, the wish is that she share the secret of her beauty with others. For Gideon Garatdjian, the wish is that he receive the missing part of his head.

So they saw and they knew. All along they saw and they knew.

Part 3
And Then I Met Her

The spring day when a new chapter in my life will begin I turn the corner onto Amsterdam Avenue and see the man-child Sean in the bright afternoon light with a finger in Fatso Scully's face. "You got something to say, you fat fuck? You want your ass kicked in front of all your friends?"

A thrill of terror shoots through me seeing the veins like bulging cords in Sean's thick neck.

"I'm sorry, man. I'm sorry," Scully says, his normal wise guy stuff gone and all that fat probably shaking like jello inside his jumbo-size red and white LaSalle High School cardigan. Fatso Scully has gone belly up.

The basket of Sean's balloon-tired delivery bike contains a carton of groceries. He pushes the bike off the stand and pedals across the avenue and up toward Morningside Drive, his head tilted back in an angle of triumph.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Scully? You got some kind of death wish?" Kevin Donnelly is the shortest kid there, just over five feet. Even when he curses, he sounds kind and gentle, a soft-spoken sadness being in his nature. "He goes and yells out, 'There goes the Headmobile,' as Sean is riding by on his bike," he goes on, for Mark's ears. Kevin takes a heavy drag on his Parliament. He makes the tip glow. Kevin is fourteen and looks like he is going on eleven. Tiny pools of spit have formed around his sneakered feet on the cracked sidewalk. Smoke. Spit. Smoke. Spit. It goes that way.

Some of the kids say Sean's head is shaped like a hammer. Hammerhead, they call him, but never to his face. They can afford to sound on my head. Squarehead.

Blockhead. Names of that sort. They know there will be no reprisal. Sean is something else. Sean has the power to take you down. He has that power in both fists and he has it in his will, which pays no mind to your larger size and strength.

Sounding. Your momma goes down for wooden nickels. Your momma wears combat boots. Always something about mommas.

"Fuck you," Scully says, sullenness entering his face and tone.

But Luis is right on him. "No, man, Sean's going to fuck you. He's going to fuck you up bad," Luis says. His words are hard, emphatic, like the pitches delivered by his strong right arm. Luis lives a few blocks away, down on One Hundred Ninth Street. He and Kevin are classmates at Bishop DuBois High School. Scully can say fuck you to Kevin, but not to Luis. Luis is big and broad-shouldered, and hit hard.

LaSalle and Bishop DuBois and Cardinal Hayes and Power Memorial and Xavier and Archbishop Molloy. An Irish Catholic world of mass and confession and the Baltimore catechism, the hard fists of the brothers at the Ascension school down on One Hundred Seventh Street.

Have you ever thought someone was interested in you even as he was trying hard to ignore you? I am thinking that way about Sean right now. And I'm not even thinking it. I am feeling it. Sean hadn't looked at me, and yet he was looking at me the whole time. Remembering him scaling the batting cage in pursuit of Frenchie the Algerian on that rocky ballfield in Riverside Park three years before. He is a part of me now in the way that all the young street fighters on the West Side of Manhattan are part of me now because of the fearlessness that they show.

A balding man with a red nose and broken blood vessels in his face comes out of the grocery next door. Quart bottles of beer clank in the big brown bag he carries as he slowly climbs the steps of the gray stoop and disappears into the tenement. Every day is the same thing with Scully's father after his shift as a city bus driver. Scully and his family must qualify as the fattest family in the world, or at least in Morningside Heights. Soon his pudgy twelve-year-old sister and his sumo-wrestler-sized mother head up the steps.

"Damn, Scully, your family got some serious bulk," Jimmy Riley says.

"Fuck you," Scully replies, not in anger, almost lazily.

That afternoon we play stickball against a windowless wall of the nearby hospital, food fumes from the kitchen blowing out of a metal vent. The game ends when Scully smacks the Spaldeen into the grounds of the rectory of the Notre Dame Church, the pink ball lost somewhere under the English ivy.

I have finished my homework in two study halls, leaving me free to stay out with my friends into the evening playing ringolevio. One team hunts; the other hides, so as not to get caught and stuck in jail.

"Your ass is mine," Luis, the jailer, shouts, when he sees me sprinting for the jail trying to free Scully and Kevin, and moments later it was true. My ass is his, or my chest is, as Luis clamps me in an iron grip.

"Damn, you're all bones," Luis says, causing my face to turn red when anyone remarks on my thinness. *Underweight*. The word pollutes me with shame. Luis is telling me what I already know—that there isn't enough of me. It isn't easy to bounce back. The hurt just seems to get in there and stay.

Afterward, we lean, sweaty and winded, against the cars parked next to Butler Library, one of those big, classical Columbia University buildings. The names of men who are only names to me—Herodotus and Plato and Sophocles and Aristotle and others—are carved in its facade. If Scully's stoop is our second home, then Columbia is our third.

Across the street a girl steps out of the Hotel Arizona. I follow her with my eyes as she heads toward the corner of Amsterdam Avenue under the sodium vapor lights of the new, sleek lampposts the city has been installing.

She has come into Jimmy Riley's line of vision, too. "Hey, baby," he shouts. You can count on skinny Jimmy Riley, with his blond hair and laughing ways, to make some noise like that.

"What you going to do if she answers you?" Luis asks. "You ain't got no words for her. You low on charm and looks and savoir faire."

"I let this do the talking," Jimmy says, his frail body shaking with manic laughter as he grabs his crotch.

We move just beyond the wrought-iron commemorative arch to the steps that serve as a side entrance to the campus. "A gift from the class of 1929," say the gold-painted words on the arch. That was a long time ago, 1929. The gift has to mean the time that those alumni were there meant something to them. And why shouldn't it? To be enrolled at Columbia is to take your place with the gods. It means to feel chosen to experience all the warmth that comes from that. It means they are elevated far above the street that I'm looking out on. It doesn't matter that they wear those silly freshman beanies as part of their orientation. They are in. *In.*

Jimmy hadn't meant to be taken seriously. Didn't Luis understand that? Luis, who is now blowing perfect smoke rings from his Winston, didn't have to put him down with his brutal truth. Why couldn't Jimmy be left alone to imagine himself as a Romeo? Even if Jimmy Riley tries not to show it, the hurt is there. These kids. I feel safe while playing games with them; sitting around is a riskier matter.

Since I first saw the girl, I've been staring at the hotel from which she emerged, hoping to see her return in her cutoff jeans and short-sleeved pink blouse and with that slightly pigeon-toed walk. And now there she is, reentering the hotel clutching a bag of groceries.

"You want to fuck her, Gideon?" Scully pretends to be dumb but is slyly observant. Like a powerful wave, the question knocks me down just as I am struggling to get over Luis's remark about my weight. For the second time I turn red. It isn't just Scully's crudeness. I haven't found a way to talk about sex with the other kids, even if I think about it all the time.

Scully runs his hand hard over the back of my head. "My man Flathead is horny," he announces.

"Sure he wants to fuck her. Right, Gideon? You want to stick your skinny dick in her, don't you? You're going to go home and jerk off over her, aren't you?" Philip Malloy is a little bit crazy. The other day he just missed Scully's head with a full swing of a stickball bat. And so it is best to be careful with Philip, as a sharp answer could lead to a fight. We are both the same height— 5'6"—but Philip is clearly stronger.

Jerry begins to laugh, as I can depend on him to do when someone is sounding on me.

"What are you laughing about, Jerry? You think you're so all right you can laugh like that at Gideon?" Jerry gets real quiet now that Philip is on him. "Where'd you get skin like that? Someone dip you in lye?" Philip asks.

"No one dipped me in lye," Jerry says. "I had an allergic reaction to penicillin, that's all."

"Where do you come from?" Philip's question is like a blunt instrument.

"I come from here."

"What's here?"

"America."

How far will Philip go? Will he start in on Jerry's woolly hair and broad nose? Will he force Jerry to explain that his real father is Estonian and that he has been not run over but "runned over" by a Soviet tank during the takeover of the Baltic countries during World War II and that the Negro man his Estonian mother lives with is not his natural father? I don't want to see Jerry get banged on.

"Jerry's from America." Scully laughs derisively, sensing a victim.

"What are you laughing about, Scully?" There are harsh sparks in Philip's challenging question. "You ever look closely at Scully's pants, guys? Look at that fat thigh and tell me you don't see a come stain there."

"Come on, man, that's dry milk," Scully says. Now it is time for his face to redden again, as it had when Sean humiliated him.

"Tell it to your old lady, Scully."

Jimmy Riley returns slugging from a beveled twelve-ounce bottle of Pepsi. The glow on his gaunt, narrow face says no lasting harm has come to him from Luis's words.

"You see that girl I shouted to? I go, 'What you doing tonight, Babes? Let's you and me go down some alleyway.' So she goes, 'Your cock ain't big enough to make the proposition even interesting.'" Jimmy laughs in his wild, self-deprecating way.

"Let's go, boys. It's time." Louie stands at the top of the steps with his jangling keys. A billed cap sits on his balding head and the leather strap of his time clock slants across the top of his gray uniform. As part of his rounds he locks the gate every night.

"I hear he's an old faggot who likes boys," Philip says in that hard, disparaging voice of his. The kind of boy who chews barbed wire for breakfast. We are outside the gates by now.

"Gideon's heard the same thing. Right, Gideon?" Scully again.

"Your fat fucking mother heard the same thing," Philip says.

Philip lives on Morningside Drive, in a solid and well-maintained building with a front of hedges and a flowerbed in spring and summer. There is nothing of the squalor of the tenements on Amsterdam Avenue on his street. Just beyond his building and down a deep drop is Morningside Park, where only the very foolish wander the elegant footpaths, as brooding Harlem is further to the east. If his handsome building has full access to the morning sun and he can wear oxblood loafers and tweed jackets and khaki pants, it is because his father does not drive a bus or walk the beat with a nightstick and a holstered gun. His father owns a bar and grill. In an earlier time his father was a prize fighter, a middleweight with a thumping right who still enjoys coming out from behind the stick to bang with unruly customers.

The night is over for Philip, but not for the rest of us.

“Let’s go visit Fritz,” Jimmy Riley says, and so we wander west across Broadway, past a row of fraternity houses that will shatter the quiet on Friday and Saturday night with loud music and noisy, drunken partygoers. We come to the hilly part of One Hundred Fourteenth Street, where Edward Macy still lives. Halfway down the hill, we enter a single-room occupancy with a Rooms to Let sign hanging out front.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the man at the front desk says. He has a fireplug body and a mashed nose and is chewing on a cigar.

“We’re going to see Fritz the butcher,” Jimmy Riley says.

“Fritz the butcher? You got to pay to see Fritz the butcher. Fritz the butcher is an important man. He’ll turn you into as big a bum as he is,” the man says. “Third floor,” he goes on, waving us away.

Fritz isn’t a bum and he isn’t so big. In fact, he’s small and balding, with only a patch of red hair remaining. Momma orders from the store where he works, sending the cleaver through the bone to sever the chops and trim the fat with a flashing knife on the chopping block before wrapping the meat in that thick amber butcher paper.

“Are my little boys here for pussy? Is that why they have come?” Fritz is like a lynx or of some other clever little animal. He sees shrewdly through those wire-frame glasses, piercing us with knowing eyes.

“Damn straight,” Luis says, heading for the stack of *Playboy* magazines in the single room.

Louie. He has stayed in my mind. And the girl, too. Did she really say that to Jimmy? Do girls care about the size of a boy's penis? It doesn't seem possible that she said those words. And yet, suppose she did?

"Hey Gideon, look, for God's sake. It won't kill you," Luis says. Several copies of *Playboy* lie on the floor opened to the centerfold. But I can't look. My eyes remain averted from the airbrushed photos of the naked women.

"What's the matter, Gideon? You don't like the girls? You're not different from us, are you?" First Philip. Now Fritz.

"No," I say, turning away.

"Why doesn't everyone just leave him alone?" Kevin's defense of me is only further cause for embarrassment.

I count the seconds, waiting for the shackles of self-consciousness to fall away so I can leave. Only some need for concealment has caused me to come in the first place. I know where I want to be, and everything in me is screaming to get there. As I step toward the door, my fear eases that Scully has read my mind. I can be grateful for the power of the *Playboy* women to distract not only Scully but the others as well.

I pause outside on the dark street, harboring the thought that devious Scully might decide to follow me, before streaking up the hill and across Broadway back to the Columbia campus as if it is the Promised Land.

Louie is still making his rounds. There he is just coming out of the main entrance to Butler Library. That jowly face and thin-lipped little mouth. He looks around, and seeing no one, motions me inside with a short wave.

The thud of his heavy belt buckle as it falls to the floor of the carpeted office. The smell of sweat and cigarettes. The sight of his polka dot boxer shorts. The thrill as Louie directs the beam of the flashlight over my naked body. The feel of his cold mouth. The way I come immediately, as I always do.

“Shh. Don’t move,” Louie says, placing a hand on my bare shoulder.” But no one is there. No one is ever there.

Louie leads me to the gate he had earlier locked. Through the bars I see the girl just as she is stepping out of the Hotel Arizona. Seeing me as well, she pauses. She is smiling, but now there is also a look of perplexity as Louie lets me out. She then waves and goes on her way, disappearing around the corner. Her smile. Her wave. Some crazy excitement, some longing is wild within me now.

All three bulbs of the pole lamp are burning. Luke stands naked, staring into the full-length mirror, his feet spread on the black and red linoleum we bought a couple of years before to try to improve the room. I go to my desk in the corner and turn on the gooseneck lamp. Everything is in order: the black-and-tan algebra book, the thin blue French text, the Kittredge paperback copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, my three-ring-binder looseleaf with subject dividers.

As always during these spells I leave my brother alone. I think of his trances as like sleepwalking, which I read somewhere is dangerous to wake a person from. Besides, his trances never last any longer than Momma's spells down at the tabernacle. Now he lowers his arm from his nose and moves closer to the mirror. His neck and back are cratered with acne, as is his face, which he is now inspecting. Luke virtually bathes in Phisohex, for all the good it does him. Phisohex for his face and body and Wildroot for his hair—gobs of the stuff to keep his straight brown hair shaped in a duck's ass. Now he moves on to his teeth, knocking his uppers and lowers together a few times to be sure they are sound. Like kicking the tires or something.

"Were you with Nancy?" I ask. Nancy Becker is his girlfriend. Her family's apartment is Luke's second home.

"Yeah. But I left early. She's got this tutor who helps her with analytic geometry a couple of nights a week. Winston. You remember him, right? He threw you out for wrecking his train set."

"Sure. I remember."

“Nancy thinks he’s so smart. And he is, I guess. A’s in everything. He’s got this bad case of athlete’s foot and wears white cotton socks. He changes them two or three times a day to try to keep his feet dry. His feet look disgusting.”

“Why disgusting?”

“They’re all red and scaly.”

“What causes athlete’s foot?”

“Some kind of fungus.”

“It sounds awful.”

“Nancy doesn’t really like him. She thinks he’s something of a creep. You know what I mean?”

“Sure,” I say.

“But she needs to bring her math grades up if she wants to get into a good college, she says. She’s pretty smart, you know. I could tell, back in ninth grade, that she was going to be something, even when she had all that wire in her mouth. I’m able to recognize stuff like that. Not everybody can do that. Right?”

“Right,” As if Luke is some talent scout who has discovered a young Mickey Mantle or Roger Maris. I’m uncomfortable when Luke leans on me. I feel like I have to say what I don’t truly believe and that he will erupt in anger or simply fall on the floor and die from hurt feelings if I don’t. The reassurance I give him is so false. I want to scream out my uneasiness. I want to say, “Wake up, fool. Nancy Becker is preparing for the future and you are not.”

“They have this beautiful apartment on Riverside Drive. You should see it,” Luke says.

Every night he tells me about Nancy Becker and her family's beautiful apartment on Riverside Drive. And every night I think, What about you, Luke? What about you?

Luke turns on the radio. An old Elvis song, "Love Me Tender," is playing. "It's late, Luke. Turn it down. Momma's sleeping," I call to my brother, even as the sound reverberates within me and unleashes longings I have no words for. But Luke only laughs.

My father is now standing in the doorway, his eyes ablaze under his bushy eyebrows. He is still in his brown suit and wide red tie. He reaches for the knob and turns off the radio. "What is the meaning of this?" There is quiet indignation in his voice.

"Nothing." Luke is a mixture of sullenness and fear.

"What is nothing? You wake the whole house and that is nothing?"

"I didn't wake the whole house. You're just coming in," Luke says.

"Should I hit you? Is that what you are asking me to do?"

"Do what you want."

"You are sick, maybe? You would like me to put you in a hospital for crazy people, where you belong?"

"No. I want you to hit me. Come on over here and hit me." Seeing Luke naked and grinning, his right arm cocked and his hand balled into a fist, my father backs out of the room.

Once again wonder why Luke should need my father's blows. A bond of some sort is better than no bond at all? There has to be a reason why Luke doesn't just slip away. Maybe that is the difference between us. Luke will always need our father in some way, and I never will.

"Like everyone has to live in terror of his big fucking hand," Luke mutters, sitting on the bottom bunk.

My antennae are up now, as they are every night awaiting my father's arrival.

In the bunk below my brother snores lightly. Minutes later there is another sound, that of the door opening and footsteps coming closer in the dark. "No," I shout. "No."

My father's fist makes a thudding sound on Luke's body under the blanket. Luke wakes up screaming.

"I told you I would get you. I told you you would pay for not respecting your father." My father is gasping for breath. He is not young. He is sixty. Old to be a father. Old, period.

The light has come on. "What is this? Tell me please what this is. Tell me." My mother has appeared in her white terrycloth robe. She holds her chest, as if to stop it from heaving.

But no one tells her. No one speaks.

"Do you wish to kill me? We cannot have this violence. Do you not understand, any of you?"

But Momma doesn't die and my father doesn't die and Luke doesn't die. No one dies. No one. Sleep comes. It really does. But before it can, I lie once again in the darkness watching the lights from the cars down on Broadway sweep along the ceiling. My mind moves past the stuff of family to thoughts of Louie, and how I had been dirty but now am clean after washing myself. And then my mind turns to the girl, and the feeling that came to me when I saw her through the bars of the gate.

Luke is still sleeping in the lower bunk when I get up the next morning. He has a welt on his face from one of my father's blows. His face is handsome if you can see past the massive acne. My brother wants to look like Elvis, and maybe he does, if only a little.

The smell of brewing coffee and the sound of a broom being swept along the floor come from the kitchen as I step into the bathroom, where I wash my face with a bar of Ivory soap that has been standing in a small pool of dirty water in the cracked basin. I then sniff several towels and choose the one that smells least sour before drying myself. On a shelf above the sink sits a small metal sterilizer for my father's insulin needle. Sometimes, though not this morning, I see him through a partially open door jabbing the needle into his meager, hairy thigh. He isn't real private about that sort of thing.

"Such a mess," my father says, sliding the last of the coffee grounds and potato peels and pork chop bones from the dustpan into the garbage can. The dogs, being hungry, probably toppled the cans during the night. I am like my father in that way. I too am a sweeper. I feel his helpless anger at the chaos all around him.

"I am praying for your brother. I am praying that his mind will not be so sick as to betray his father. Do you know who I am? Do you know?" He has put aside the broom dustpan and turned his attention to me.

"You're my father," I say.

"I am your Armenian father, and there is a father in Heaven, and you must worship him if we are to stay alive, and even if we don't. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I say.

"This is Mommy's place. I set it for her," my father says, though he needn't have, as it is the same thing he says every morning. A delicate china cup and saucer are set out

for my mother on the red and white oilcloth that covers the round oak table. My father sits in an old black wicker chair and wears a brown robe with no pajama bottoms underneath. Daddy's corner, we call it, where on a set of shelves he keeps his religious literature: third-class mail from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and other parts of the country, pamphlets and books printed on cheap paper, often in blue and red ink. The writings of A. A. Allen and Morris Cerullo and other evangelists, well-groomed and silk-suited stars of the revival circuit with deep, powerful voices who thunder the word of God at tent gatherings and stadiums and arenas throughout the country.

“Would you like a piece of toast?”

"Thank you," I say.

The toaster is on his side of the table. He hands me two pieces of lightly burned rye bread. How uneasy I remain in my father's presence. His brittle temperament and frequent explosions are one thing, but then there is his physical decrepitude. He is sixty now, a man with sallow, wrinkled skin and a huge, somewhat flattened nose with gaping nostrils, and thick, wild eyebrows and thinning gray hair. Glancing down, I see his thin, hairy calves and his huge feet in brown leather slippers; the sight of his discolored toenails cause me to recoil. I am uneasy with everything at the table. It makes me cringe to eat things that have been touched by my father's veiny hand and to see crumbs in the stick of butter set out on a small plate. But the butter-soaked rye toast is delicious.

"I gave a sermon last night. You came to hear me once. You must come again. Only this time you must not run away. You must know who your father is."

“Was it a good sermon? I mean, I'm sure it was.” The night before he punched my brother and now he is talking about church.

"Yes, it was good, my son, and more than good." The metal of my father's bridge flashes as he opens his mouth to bite down on his piece of toast.

"I will get you some coffee," my father says, when Momma comes to the table. She is still in her robe and slippers, and her gray hair is hanging down and she wears the look of trouble that came to her face with last night's conflagration. She is living in her silence now and making us feel it so that we will know what the severity of violence is and the finality it can bring, to us and to her as well. Two cubes of sugar she adds to her coffee before browning it with heavy cream she pours from the half-pint carton.

"Such a mess this president makes of our beautiful country. Such a mess. Do you read what has happened in Cuba? Last year he tried to overthrow Castro with a handful of idiots and now they have been sentenced to years and years in a Cuban prison unless we pay ransom money. Under Eisenhower this never could have happened. Never."

"Hayk, no. No sugar. Your doctor," Momma says, seeing my father reach for the sugar cubes.

"Just a little. This one time," my father says, dropping the cube into his black coffee.

The conversation about the sugar is not a new one.

"Are you all right, Momma?" I say, standing at the front door later that morning.

"Why would I not be all right, my son?"

"Momma, I said are you all right?"

"I am all right, my son."

"Why do I not feel you are all right?"

"Stop now," Momma says. "Run on your long legs to school."

I am embarrassed kissing Momma goodbye, the way I always am, as if it is too close for my being to bear. And Momma feels it too, I am sure.

I walk weightless, in the attire of success—my blue blazer with the school crest that shows an archway and a tree and charcoal gray pants and brown penny loafers—out onto Broadway, where I stop in at the luncheonette for a copy of the *Daily News*.

“So, Gideon, the Dodgers are good this year?” Lev leans over the counter, smoke from his Camel cigarette pouring out his nose and mouth. He is the only man I have ever seen, apart from Jimmy Durante, who has a bigger nose than my father. I like Lev, but he frightens me, the way most men do. Any minute now I will disappoint him and he will grow angry, like my father.

“Real good,” I say, thinking of Koufax and Drysdale, with that number 53 on his big back. And they now have Maury Wills at shortstop and Brooklyn Tommy Davis and fleet Willie Davis in the outfield. I check the box score for the Dodgers in the sports section. “They’re going to do it. You’ll see. They won last night. Stan Williams a five-hitter. And Tommy Davis a home run. Pow.”

Lev laughs. “Is a long season, no?” Lev’s sentences lack subjects. Miss Simpson, my English teacher, would disapprove, but Lev doesn’t need subjects to make himself understood. His sentences lean into and hook you with question marks hanging on the end. I feel the weight of his big, almond-shaped eyes. I feel his power—those strong arms that shoot from the short sleeves of his polo shirt and that thick neck. But the shirt also reveals those faded blue numbers running up his left wrist that make my stomach flip. They have the effect of turning him into something not quite human, like the cattle I see

branded with hot irons on those westerns I watch on TV. They situate Lev, for me, in the reality of his grim past.

On the short subway ride to Ninety-sixth Street, I continue to read the box scores, but by the time the train enters the station and the doors open, pain has dissolved my absorption in the the sports section of the paper. On the platform I lean my head against a steel pillar. I have abandoned Momma. I have left her all alone, and now she is crying and has no one to comfort her. The feeling of sadness overwhelms me. I want to die. For some time I stand there, struggling against the impulse to run home to Momma and tell her I love her and make things all right for her.

When I can I climb the stairs to street level, and feel a tap on my shoulder. “Hi, Jerry,” he say, with false enthusiasm, for now I will have to walk with him, and I do not want to walk with Jerry, not when I am on my way to school.

“Why’d you disappear like that last night? We were having a good time with Fritz.”

“I just had to get home,” Mark said.

“You think you could loan me a dollar. There’s some things I need to get and I forgot to ask my moms.”

I fish a dollar bill from my pocket and hand it to Jerry. Now a new emotion grips me, not an excess of concern for Momma but extreme fear that my schoolmates will see me with Jerry, in his jeans and polo shirt and with skin that makes him appear as if he has been the victim of some hideous acid attack. Freddy Snyder, in his Claremont getup, sails past, in the company of another classmate, John Edel. “Hey, Garatdj,” he calls out, a smile of heightened amusement on his beak-nosed, four-eyed face.

And then there is another voice, harsher, from across the street. "Hey, Jerry, what you doing with that private school faggot?" A chunky kid stands with his legs spread and his arms folded across his chest. A Puerto Rican boy, maybe, with short black hair. "Why don't you get all of his white boy money while you over there?" Some truculent war on the English language in the absence of the auxiliary verb. Around him are other boys and a few girls. Behind them is a fortress-like construction with metal guards on the windows that make the building look more like a detention center than a school.

The preppy uniform signifies soft middle class ways and makes me an easy target. It links me with all the other kids at my school, including the boy getting out of the chauffeured Cadillac.

"That boy don't play. He wants to get into your chest," Jerry says, and crosses over to the other side of the street, where he stands with his jeering classmates.

I walk slowly toward the brownstone building that houses my school when what I want to do is bolt. But if I do, the boy will see my fear and pounce before I can reach the finish line. Salvatore Negron, wrapped in his cape, casts a long shadow, as if every Puerto Rican carries the lethal menace of a switchblade knife.

"Who was that kid you were with?" Freddy asks that morning, in home room.

"Just somebody I know," I say.

"Just somebody you know?"

"From my neighborhood."

"Where did you say you live?"

"The Upper West Side."

"What are you doing this weekend?" Freddy asks. He has the kind of loud voice that brought the whole room into the conversation.

"I'll be going with my family to see *Splendor in the Grass*," I say, remembering that I had seen the name of the film displayed on the marquee of the Nemo Theater on One Hundred Tenth Street that morning.

Frank's mouth hangs open. "You're going to see *Splendor in the Grass* with your family? With your family? Are you kidding me? People, did you hear what Garatdj is going to see with his parents?" Freddy Snyder gives every word of the movie the emphasis he feels it deserves. And in drawing in the rest of the room, Frank seems to prove that my classmates are a monolithic entity from which I am permanently separated.

"Let Garatdj see what he wants to see." Lance has come to my rescue. I feel liked by him. I can't say why. It's not as if we spend any time together. Though Lance hasn't performed at the school, it is said that he has a musical gift. He has a handsome face, with long brown hair that falls over his forehead.

For the rest of the day Freddy's articulated amazement gets replayed over and over in my mind. Stupid, stupid, stupid. In such a way do I reproach myself for having spoken so carelessly and for having guessed so wrong in trying to make myself presentable to Freddy Snyder.

It won't happen again, I promise myself, staring out the window across the yard to the grade school building. Now that I am in ninth grade, I have moved across the yard to the high school.

I feel reduced, small, confined, cowed. The boys and girls with the big minds have mastery here, and I have only my amiable smile with which to counter them.

After lunch, singing comes from my home room. By the open door I stand and listen as the voices of a handful of girls, in their plaid skirts and white blouses, rise in jubilant song, tunes from Broadway shows to which they seem to know all the words. Diane Coleman and Robin Abel—both of them tall and slender and smart—are like my sisters Naomi and Rachel, only they are not deformed in their looks or their manner and will never dwell in crummy one-room dwellings. Even indoors, these girls shine in the bright light of day, and the love I feel for their intelligence and spirit and everything they are will not go away. Despite the gaiety the room feels dangerous and off-limits, primed for an explosion of mockery, but I need my Latin book for the next class, and maybe they won't even notice me. As I move along the perimeter and reach inside my desk, the singing stops and silence descends. I have almost made it to the door when Diane Coleman shouts out, "Hi, Dreamboat," prompting huge laughter that turns my face red.

Maybe they will all go to hell. Maybe they will all be sorry. Just because I am with them now in my weightlessness does not mean I will be with them forever. The day will end and my other life will begin. Throughout the morning and afternoon my mind has been turning to the girl in the cutoff jeans who waved to me the night before. She has given me something to look forward to as I watch Mr. Arbuckle write quadratic equations on the blackboard with a new piece of chalk. And in the last class of the day, Miss Simpson, her gray hair pulled into a leaden bun, leads a discussion of *Romeo and Juliet*. "Take thou some new infection to the eye, and the rank poison of the old shall die," Benvolio says to Romeo, lovesick over Rosalind. How sad that Romeo should be mired in such pain, I think, as I hurry out the door toward home.

But there is no girl near or around Scully's stoop that afternoon nor in the days that follow. And then, a week later, when I have stopped looking past Scully and Luis and Jimmy Riley and the rest of them in the hope that she will materialize, there she is, stepping out of the Hotel Arizona, as on that first night.

"Where's your gang?" she says.

"I don't have a gang."

"Sure you do. "

"That's no gang. They're just friends of mine."

She wears her strawberry-blond hair in a bowl cut and her green eyes seem to glitter.

"Well, one of them has a fresh mouth."

"That could be."

"What do you mean, 'That could be.' He does."

"Do you live here?" I say, pointing to the hotel.

"Oh, no. My father has me come down a few afternoons during the week to buy groceries for my grandmother. She's got a room there. I'm just going to the store for her now."

"Come down from where?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Sorry," I say.

"Just kidding. One Hundred Twenty-Second Street."

"That's not so far."

"Not for me it isn't. Do you have a name?"

“My name is Gideon. What’s yours?”

“Jane. Jane Thayer. Do you have a last name, Gideon?”

“Sure I do.”

“Well, is it a secret or do I get to hear it?”

“It’s not a secret. It’s Garatdjian.”

“Garatdjian? What kind of name is that?”

“I don’t know. It’s a name.”

“Well, I have to get going,” Jane says.

When she has gone a few feet, I call out. “Maybe I could walk you home tonight.”

I don’t know where the words came from. They are just there.

“I like that idea, Gideon Garatdjian. I’ll meet you here at eight o’clock,” she says.

The lights in Butler Library give a soft, warm glow, as do those behind the leaded glass windows of the cafeteria in the John Jay Building. By the unused tennis court I take her hand. Soon we come to the mall that bisects the campus and climb the steps under the serene gaze of Alma Mater, her arms raised and book in lap and scepter in hand. As we proceed along the angled brick footpath, I am unable to turn my head, afraid that the spell will break if I look at her. And my hand—it is permanently and self-consciously locked on hers.

Near the north end of the campus is a long set of stairs, which we descend to a construction site. A gray plywood fence curves around the university gym. In this dark and desolate area of the campus I pause and turn toward Jane, who now stands against the temporary fence. I lean toward her. We kiss. Her soft lips part slightly, and I feel the tip of

her tongue. The kiss seems to go on forever. When it ends, I blurt, "I want to marry you someday," hardly knowing what I have said, my self-consciousness so acute.

"Slow down. Slow down," Jane laughs, deepening my shame.

Now a light is shining. From our feet to our head it examines us, before fixing on our faces. It is a guard. It is Louie. He looks old and fat.

"Nice night for love," he says. He is smiling. No, he is grinning. When neither Jane nor I respond, he says, "Kind of lonely over here. A good place to get in trouble." And just like that he continues his rounds, his gumshoes silent on the pavement.

"Say, is that the same guard I saw you with the night I first saw you?"

"You saw me with a guard?"

"He was letting you out of the gate."

"Oh, right. Everybody knows Louie."

"Well, he gives me the creeps."

Beyond the confines of the Columbia campus the big brown main building of Teachers College softly spreads along the two-lane cobblestone street. Like a warm blanket it is, enveloping us in its reassuring quality. Everywhere the institutions of the gifted, holding us in their thrall, and on their fringes the dwelling places of the remnant. East we head to Amsterdam Avenue, following its downward path to One Hundred Twenty-Second Street.

"This is me," she says, stopping in front of a five-story walkup building.

"I'll see you soon, I hope," I say.

"Not if I see you first," she says, and heads off laughing up the stoop. It is an expression I have heard before, without quite knowing what it means.

As I climb the hill toward Broadway, I read out loud the names carved in the porticos of the old apartment buildings--the Delaware, Simna Hall, Marimpol Court, Reldnas Hall—trying to block out painful thoughts. *I want to marry you someday.* I don't know much about girls, but I sense they don't want to hear stuff like that.

In my room that night I close the door and listen in the dark to the radio. Luke is still out with Nancy Becker, and so I lie on the bottom bunk as a song from the musical *Oliver* comes on the air. "Where Is Love?" a boy sings in a plaintive voice. The song washes over me; warm tears stream down my face. Does love in fact fall from the sky above or appear from under a willow tree? Oh, the words aren't important. It is just the voice. Even as I lie there, I sense something excessive in my nature. A thirst or a hunger, it is, something sickly that renders me helpless to do anything but lie there.

And perhaps Luke senses the same thing. "What the hell are you doing?" he asks, opening the door and turning on the light.

"Nothing," I say.

"Are you OK? Did something happen?"

"I'm fine," I say, drying my face on my sleeve and climbing up into my own bunk.

"You are about to be in the red," Miss Timmons says. Miss Timmons is a small woman with frosted white hair who runs the school cafeteria. I have come to her on the checkout line with a hamburger and half-pint of milk on my tray.

"I'm sorry?" I say.

“In the red. Do you not know what that means? Have your mother make out another check. You need some good food to put some meat on those bones.”

She speaks with a half-smile on her face that is not really a smile at all. In one exchange has she managed to doubt my intelligence and make fun of my body. And her mention of Momma’s name paralyzes me further with self-consciousness. I do not want my family on the school premises in any way.

In the afternoon a boy from one of the upper grades says, with an assassin’s smile on his narrow face, "I'll bet you don't weigh more than fifty pounds." I have no defense in the face of the perceived meanness of the older student and can only go numb. Of course he has been right to make his knife thrust. A missing part of my head and a body I shouldn’t be seen with in public. I smile back at the upperclassman to show he hasn’t hurt me. A smile, an amiable smile. It is all I can offer anyone at this school.

And there is Mr. Horvas, the school librarian, with that permanent expression of peeve on his handsome face, as if the world itself is an affront and worthy of low-grade outrage. "He says it's a good book, and he's only read fifty pages," Mr. Horvas sneers, to a pretty blond girl in one of the upper classes, having heard me reply to Freddy Snyder in the school library that I am liking *The Grapes of Wrath*.

And of course Mr. Horvas is right. How stupid to imagine I could offer an opinion on a book after fifty pages. How even more stupid that such a thing has never occurred to me.

“How did you get my number?”

“From the phone book. I went through all the Thayers and came to the one with your address.”

“Good detective work,” she says.

“That was fun last night.”

“Lots,” Jane says.

“You weren’t around today.”

“I couldn’t get down to my grandmother’s. I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“I can walk you home?”

She laughs, uncontrollably, for a short while.

“What?” I say, laughing along with her, even if I don’t know why.

“Yes you can walk me home.”

At the Take-Home Deli on the corner of One Hundred Fifteenth Street and Broadway, "The Duke of Earl" comes loud from the radio ("And I, I walk through my dukedom, nothing can stop me, the Duke of Earl"). “You boys a little young for the suds.” The checkout man has a smiling, crafty face. He takes my money and bags the sixpack of Rheingold, trthrowing in a church key as well. “You both be cool now,” he says.

“Duke, Duke, Duke, Duke of Earl,” we sing, trying to approximate a royal strut, as we head down the hill and into the park.

I had never bought beer before. The idea had just entered my mind. I have some idea that it will take me higher than I was from the night before. I want the beer to take me higher than I have ever been, higher than the stars that are out on this spring night.

We take the stairs down to the lower level of the park, and walk west, as if called there by the highway and the Hudson River beyond. On the Jersey shore the Spry sign glows a constant red.

"You see what Ellie did last night? A wrecking crew. Two homers and a double. Ellie's good too, isn't he?" Jerry says, Ellie being Elston Howard, a catcher and sometime first baseman and outfielder for the very white New York Yankees. Jerry is looking for a Negro face to light up his life. He doesn't say that. He says it without saying it. Mentioning Ellie is as close to saying he too is a Negro as Jerry can come. I do not challenge Jerry to tell the truth when he talks about how his real father was "runned over" by a Soviet tank while defending his homeland. Lies have to be allowed for. You have to place soft protective padding around them. And anyway, I have my own lies, my *Splendor in the Grass* lie and my "My family lives on the Upper West Side" lie. He has placed his lie about his father in my protective custody. "*Ellie is good too, isn't he?*" It is like crying to be seen and heard and *valued*.

"Sure. Ellie's real good," I say, though when I am at the ballpark, my focus is on Mantle, as if he is a beacon of light, standing at the plate in that coiled stance with that big number 7 on his back, or on Roger Maris, with his arms so beautifully strong in short sleeves, as I used to think of Duke Snider more than Willie Mays before the Dodgers and Giants left town.

Below, through the tangle of brush on the other side of the fence, cars with their headlights on speed along, their tires making a spanking sound as they hit the cracks in the road. Beyond is the river, with its filmy, sewage-filled water, and on the other side, the Palisades and the lights along the Jersey shoreline.

Couples stroll along the pathways, passing under the long branches of scaly plane trees full of leaves. Suddenly the earth seems to tremble. From the grates of the railroad tunnel spaced in the park's lawns comes the loud rumble of a freight train. We don't go to the tunnel anymore to wait in ambush with a supply of rock ballast to boom off the rolling stock of the New York Central.

"You remember that girl the night we were playing ringolevio?"

"What girl?"

"You know. The one Jimmy Riley claimed said something to him."

"Oh yeah. That girl."

"I walked her home," I say.

"Oh yeah?"

When I press the church key against the top of the can, beer foams out of the triangular holes. The beer has a metallic taste, like coins in my mouth.

"I kissed her. She let me," I say.

"She got a girlfriend? Maybe she could get somebody for me."

"I don't know," I say, opening another can.

I had wanted the beer to make me feel like a balloon floating higher and higher, as happened the night before listening to the song from *Oliver*. But as we climb the hill out of the park, I feel dull and sluggish.

Outside my building a tall Negro man stands with his arms crossed. With him is a woman with a frizz of brownish hair and glazed eyes, her massive breasts threatening to burst her tight blouse.

“Where you been, boy?” Jerry’s father says. He looks straight ahead at Jerry, as if he doesn’t have to look at me to know who I am.

“We were in the park,” Jerry says.

“You were in the park. You were here. You were there. Everywhere you were, but not with us,” his mother says. Estonian. The word makes no sense. It smells like fish oil. Once again I picture her staring for minutes at a time into the store windows along Broadway, as if starved for the things she cannot buy.

“Let’s go home now,” Jerry’s father says, taking Jerry in hand.

In the lobby Naomi sings “Over the Rainbow” to an audience of tenants who come and go, none of them stopping so much as to pause, as if they don’t have the time for a twenty-nine-year-old woman seeking attention for her small gift. Her husband, Chuck, who sits in a stuffed chair, is more appreciative of Naomi’s offering, if belligerently so. “Your sister has a great instrument. She could be somebody.” The familiar pint bottle of wine in a green bottle rests by the side of the chair. He has the pissed off, aggrieved look that some drunks have, his face a permanent scowl.

A feeling of rage and injustice wells up that they should be there at all, making a spectacle of themselves, and prevents me from lingering. The anger is directed at Momma as much as at them. Momma just laughing at me, saying I don’t know what it is to have children, and that one day it is her prayer that we will all be together in heaven in a way that we are not here on earth.

And there is another feeling, one of fear, that they will see that I have been drinking.

“Hello, bruther-wuther,” Naomi calls out.

I wave and keep moving.

“Snotty goddamn brat,” Chuck snarls, as I start to climb the stairs.

And then my sister’s voice again. “You watch out for my husband. He’s a real man.”

Several nights a week I meet Jane in the evening in front of her grandmother’s hotel and walk her home. Staring into her pert, pretty face I feel joy but also pain that I did not know her in the earlier years of my life. Why couldn’t I have had this happiness sooner? Not that it could ever have been, since she and her parents moved around the Midwest before coming here. Even so, I have the feeling that we are born to be together. But there is no need to tell her so. I don’t have to make the same kind of mistake twice.

"Hey babes, what you doing with that goofball?" Jimmy Riley shouts, in that vaguely Negro intonation he, blond and pale, can lapse into, seeing Jane and me together. I like his surprise and that of the others who hang around Scully’s stoop. I more than like it. I am the kid who can’t look at *Playboy*, and yet I am now with this pretty girl new to the neighborhood.

“My man Flathead has got himself a girlfriend. Fucking Flathead?” Scully shouts, for all to hear.

Good. Let him shout. Let them all shout.

"It is a man named Sean on the house phone down in the lobby. He is asking to speak with you. I don't like for people to call you at night. Who is this man?" Momma has come to my room, where I am doing algebra homework. I am in the B section of Mr. Arbuckle’s class, not the A section where Diane Coleman and Robin Abel and the smarter boys can be found. I am afraid of algebra and the feelings of barely controllable rage,

mostly directed at Momma, that come over me when some of the problems stymie me—that same depth of rage as I experienced during the intelligence test.

Momma has a face full of concern. The worldliness of the world has come in its darkest form. "He's not a man," I say, putting down my pencil and leaving the room.

"I want you to see a movie with me tonight. Get down here," Sean says, in a gruff voice.

"I don't have any money," I say, afraid for some reason to tell him I have homework to do.

"That's okay, because I'm paying."

"OK," I say, throwing myself upon the night and the anarchy looming.

Momma stands in the vestibule between me and the front door. "Gideon, who is this person? Why do I not have a good feeling about him? What does he want with you?"

I do not tell her he is a boy I have not exchanged three words with and do not know how he came to be downstairs in the lobby waiting for me since I never gave him my address. Nor do I tell Momma that I recognize her power to see people for who they are. I just say, "He's from the neighborhood. We've played baseball together."

"I say to you that I don't like it. My children step out into the night and never come back. What is this night that calls and calls and never returns them? What is it? I ask you, if not the work of Satan?" There is added vehemence in Momma's voice now.

Sean's appearance startles. Gone is the five o'clock shadow and instead of jeans and a T-shirt, he is wearing a gray suit with a black turtleneck and black shoes with a high shine. If it weren't for the enormity of his head, you would say he is handsome, like a male model in one of those shirt ads.

On the corner he flags a cab, with authority, as if he has been doing it his whole life, and from the back seat gives forceful directions to the driver. The smell of the leather upholstery blends with the cologne Sean is wearing, and as we streak down Broadway, a feeling comes over me that grows only stronger throughout the evening; I have been transformed into a pretty, refined girl asked out on a date by a brute. I sense Sean's violence—it is there pulsating in his powerful body—and yet it pleases me to think that I can somehow tame him.

"If you're wondering how I found you, your friend Jerry told me where you lived," Sean says, as we pass Columbus Circle and approach Times Square.

"Is that right?" It is all I can say, as if I need to be perfect for Sean.

The blaze of lights on both sides of Seventh Avenue dull the painful image of Momma blocking my path. The strip was a feast of movie marquees and huge billboards advertising American commodities—Hygrade's Franks, Nescafé, Canada Dry, Four Roses — all competing for the eye's attention.

"Right here is good. Keep the change," he says, peeling off a ten-spot from a roll of bills and handing it to the hackie.

A red carpet has been unfurled in front of one of the theaters, and soon they were inside, settling into soft seats.

"You want something?" Sean asks.

"No, I'm OK."

"Come on. I'm buying. Tell me what you want."

So I tell him, and Sean returns with two big boxes of popcorn and sodas.

"I brought some money. I can pay," I say.

"This is on me," Sean says, as if the matter isn't for discussion.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," he says, and I wonder if he is mocking my politeness.

Since being pulled from the Nemo Theater by Hannah, I have been to movies with Jerry and the kids from Scully's stoop, but only in neighborhood theaters, but have seen nothing like the wide screen revealed as the pleated curtain slowly opens and the lights dim and the powerful sound of strings fill the air to mark the beginning of *Lawrence of Arabia*.

The film is as endless as the desert locations, T. E. Lawrence and his Arab band sweeping across the white sands of Arabia to battle the ruthless Turks. In one scene, Lawrence, disguised as an Arab, is captured by the enemy and kept in captivity overnight.

"You know what they did to him?" Sean whispers, leaning into me with a laugh of barely repressed hysteria.

On the return trip home, the cabbie plays the system of staggered streetlights on Amsterdam Avenue just right, flying from Seventy-second to 110th Street without stopping. Along the way the big face of a public clock shows the time to be 11:30 pm. How dark and quiet the streets along this lonely stretch. I have never been out this late before with homework undone, not since coming to Claremont. As we pass Ninety-third Street, I stare out at the quiet block and picture the brownstone buildings of the Claremont School and think with a sharp pang how much the school means to me. I must never fall behind. Never.

"I see you in a uniform sometimes. You go to some private school?" The question sounds like an accusation.

"Yes," he said.

"So where is this school?"

"We just passed it," I say, as if to give him the exact address would be to let him barge into the heart of his dream.

The cab leaves us at Sean's apartment building, across the street from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, dark and gloomy and out of another world, its three massive doors shut for the night. Again Sean flashes a thick roll of bills. The money is a kind of bait, and it doesn't seem likely that Sean has earned it pedaling a grocery bike.

"There's plenty more where that came from," Sean says, seeing where my eyes have gone. It would not do to tell Sean that I am less interested in his money than he might think.

As I walk toward Broadway, he calls after me. "I want to see more of you." When I turn back, he laughs loudly, his head thrown back, and struts into his building.

I want to see more of you. Such power the words have, in spite of my reservations, to create an inner glow.

His mother is at the dining table, reading from her Bible in her white robe.

"Do you know the time, foolish boy? Do you?"

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Is this what you do to me? Do you not know the trouble that I have? Do I have to have more? Where did you go with that boy?"

"To a movie," I say, trying to steel myself against her pain.

"Only God knows where your brother is. I get no help here. I just cannot take anymore of this."

Momma looks old and careworn, and the condition of her legs need not be mentioned again. There are kids in my class with parents younger now than the age Momma was when I was born.

“It was just this one time.”

“One time. One time. It’s what all my children say, before I lose them to the filth of the world.”

I lie in bed with the crushing weight of Momma upon me. I have not made things right for her; in fact, I have added to her pain. I will be very good from now on. So much depends on being so.

But Momma does not die during the night from sorrow. She has a hug and a kiss for me in the morning, and my life does not fly off the rails because I neglected my homework the night before. In study hall I manage to finish my algebra homework, a weight lifting and later there is the big red “A” atop the essay I wrote on “Romeo and Juliet” for Miss Simmons, and so I am on a straight line again, with no disorder in sight.

Once again I see that I can compartmentalize my life and succeed. I need only to be polite and amiable with my classmates and teachers, and the door to a bright future will remain open.

When, out of the blue, John Edel approaches me that day and says, “You’re a really good student,” I blush and stammer and can say nothing intelligible. John Edel is established in my mind as one of the very brightest boys in the class, and I have not forgotten how he hissed the year before, “I’m not interested in politics,” when I, in a moment of carelessness, asked him if he was for Nixon and against Kennedy the year before. And so, forever must I feel like a frivolous fool with my political concerns.

Actually, he doesn't appear out of the blue. Freddy Snyder was discussing me with John Edel only moments before. How do I know? They glanced my way as they spoke. "He's kind of interesting, and he could use a few friends. Do him a favor and talk to him," I could easily imagine Freddy Snyder saying to his good friend John. So John's visit with me wasn't natural, unrehearsed. Anyway, he said the the very worst thing to me. He spoke about my *mind*, and I have no mind, at least not a mind like John's, and so the time can only come when he finds that I am not a good student, and what kind of friendship can that be, one founded on inevitable disappointment?

John Edel earns straight As with the smallest of effort; his knowledge of science and literature and history antedate the books that are assigned to us each year; maybe such knowledge has been with him since birth. And it is the same with Ogden Connifer and the new boy, Bert Bach, whom Diane Coleman and Robin Abel and the other girls who matter find as cute as his name, though to me he doesn't look so great—a chunky kid with a big wart on his face, a snout for a nose, and fat lips. "Oh, he's so cuddly. He's like a teddy bear," they squeal.

That afternoon, I find myself briefly alone in a classroom with Diane for a few minutes. Not knowing what to say, I mention having seen Ogden picking up trash in front of the school that morning. "It's kind of an unusual thing to do," I say.

"Believe me, not half as unusual as the shape of your head," she says. Speechless, I meet her blow with a weak smile and move away to nurse my wound.

The store is just next door to Scully's stoop and isn't much: a narrow space with floorboards worn below the nail heads, a skimpy assortment of canned goods on dusty shelves, and a produce section with wilted heads of lettuce and rubbery carrots and

bananas with spotted skins. Sean stands behind the counter operating the slicing machine. The whirring blade shaves one slender piece after another off the big slab of boiled ham. He pauses to adjust the knob for thicker cuts and then resumes until a substantial pile has accumulated. He then stuffed the meat, along with a helping of cole slaw, between the two halves of a piece of hero bread, but not before slathering the bread with mustard and mayonnaise and popping a piece of stray ham in his small mouth.

I am in my street clothes, having gone home and shed my uniform for my street clothes and hurried up the long block from Broadway to Amsterdam Avenue to be here, as if not to be here is not to be in life at all.

"I'm Lawrence, and I go to the desert because it's clean," Sean proclaims. He throws back his head and laughs before tearing into the monster sandwich.

A man with a day's growth on his face comes from the back of the store. A soiled apron curves around his big belly. "What is this? A goddamn fucking restaurant?" he shouts, seeing Sean's snack.

"Fuck you and all your guinea ancestors, Funelli," Sean shouts back. "I'm a growing boy. I've got to eat."

"You know what you can eat," Mr. Funelli says. He grabs his crotch through his apron and his bulging eyes light up.

"You believe this fucking degenerate bastard?" Sean asks.

Sean and Mr. Funelli are putting on a show for me, but I don't know how to acknowledge it.

A woman with a full figure enters the store. She is young and wears a pretty green spring dress.

"Hello, Mario."

"Hello, Miss Prescott, how are you today?" Mr. Funelli asks, coming up to meet her.

"Marvelous, Mario," she says, in a big stage voice, and ticks off a list of items she will need. "I have guests coming. Can I expect the order within the hour?"

"You sure can, Miss Prescott," Mr. Funelli assures her.

"Ciao," she says, and sweeps out of the store.

"I'll take this one myself," Mr. Funelli says. For the next few minutes he put together her order in a small box, which he carried out to the bike and placed in the basket. Then he jumps on the seat, sinking the balloon tires under his heavy weight, and flashes them a loony grin as he pedals away.

"The big jerk thinks he's going to get laid, as if she's interested in the sloppy, unshaven fuck," Sean says, and starts singing "A Foggy Day in London Town," stopping after a few lines. "Someday I'm going to blow this joint," he says.

"How are you going to do that?" I ask.

"Believe me, I have a plan," Sean says, and throws back his head and laughs.

I see his need to be special. It is the same thing I see in myself sometimes.

The door opens and Jane enters. She looks pretty, with a red barrette in her strawberry-blond hair. "Hi," I say.

"Hi," she replies.

"This is my friend Sean," I say.

"Hi," Jane says to Sean. "We've met. I'm always coming here for things for my grandmother."

"Nice to meet you," Sean says, though not sounding as if it is so nice.

She comes back with a bunch of carrots from the produce bin. “They’re starting to get soft. Do you have anything fresher?” Jane says.

“That’s what we got,” Sean says, going hard on her.

“Well, I guess they’ll have to do,” Jane says.

Sean snatches the five-dollar bill she places on the counter, rings up the sale, and gives her the change without a thank-you.

I walk with her around the corner to her grandmother’s. “Is he really a friend of yours?” she asks.

“Sort of. Maybe.”

“How old is he?”

“A couple of years older than me. Why?” Mr. Funelli labors past on the bike, the basket now empty.

“Just wondering,” she says.

I don’t say anything about the movie I have been to with Sean the night before. It seems best to leave things there.

She must feel the same way too, as she doesn’t say anything more about Sean either.

“Mommy, I saw Gideon with a girl today,” My sister Vera says.

“Is that right?” Momma says.

“That’s right. And they were holding hands.”

“My Svenska pojke Gideon was holding hands with a girl?”

“Right on Broadway, Momma. Pam and I saw them with our own eyes.”

“My, oh my,” Momma says.

What Vera says is true. She was with her girlfriend Pam Becker, the two of them in their St. Andrews blue jumpers, when Jane and I ran into them.

Soon, Vera and Momma are not the only ones to know. A few nights later Luke says to me, "You know, Momma is really relieved. She wasn't sure about you, if you want to know the truth."

"What do you mean, she wasn't sure about me," I say.

"You know what I mean. She wasn't sure you like girls."

If he thinks he has hurt me, he hasn't. It's OK being a question mark. It's really, really OK.

There are miracles in this world. The real kind.

Miracle number one. I have been with Jane for a month and she hasn't yet told me to get the other part of my head. Obviously she has seen the flatness of the back of my head with her own eyes, but when we kiss she sometimes also touches the back of my head with her hand, and so she has felt that surface flat as a board. And though my whole body freezes in anticipation of the mockery to come, not a single such word does she utter. Not one single Flathead or Boxhead do I hear from her kissable lips.

Miracle number 2. I can show Jane where I live—if not the apartment, at least the lobby.

"Who put this up?" she says, pointing to the stern verse of scripture in the picture frame:

For the wages of sin is death,

But the gift of God is eternal life

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

—Roman 6: 24

“My aunt,” I say, nodding toward Auntie Eve, who has stepped out of her ground-floor apartment, whirled around in a full 360 degree spin, and shot off toward the elevator, her chin leading the way.

Momma follows Auntie Eve out of the apartment. “Momma, this is Jane.” Momma doesn’t ask where Jane lives or what her father does for a living or whether she has any brothers or sisters. Instead, she says, “And do you go to church?”

“I go to Sunday services at the Riverside Church.”

“I see. Is that an interdenominational church?” Momma asks, when she knows quite well that it is.

“Yes,” Jane says.

Interdenominational. I hear Momma thinking the word means it is a church for the faithless serving up some sinister dilution of the Christ Jesus message. Momma further thinking that the word means a place where evil can flourish and in the service of the Antichrist. It is no place for a true believer.

Momma fishes in her bag. “May I give you this? It can change your life.”

Momma has handed Jane a religious tract, printed in red type.

“Thank you,” Jane says. “I will read it.”

Momma is a fisher of men and women and girls and boys. Momma has a calling that calls to her, whether people laugh or not. She has the conviction, knowing that this life is not the only one. But I am not Momma. I can only see through the world’s eyes.

Momma goes off and Naomi appears, emerging from the elevator and heading right for us, with Chuck trailing behind. "Trying to get away, brother-wuther? Don't want to acknowledge your big sister?" Turning her attention to Jane, she says, "He likes to think he's better than us. My mother calls him Svenska pojka, because she says he's got a lot of Swedish blood in him and he has that blond hair. He doesn't know what a singer I could have been. He doesn't know anything about that. Do you know who Judy Garland is?"

"Sure. She was in *The Wizard of Oz*," Jane says.

"That's right. I could have been another Judy Garland."

"We should go," I say.

"You see. There he is rushing off, as if he has someplace to go. But you don't look like the kind of girl who needs to rush off. Chuck and I are going to the Moon Palace for dinner. Chuck is the man of the house and is taking me out. We both get beef and green peppers, with a bowl of white rice. It's so delicious. And then we get orange slices and a fortune cookie, too. My last fortune read, 'You have really fine star.' Don't you think that means something?"

"Sure. Everything means something," Jane says.

"But do you suppose they really meant, 'You are a really fine star'? Don't you think that's what they could have meant?"

"Maybe. Whoever writes those fortunes might not speak English as a first language," Jane says.

"Are you saying they are just making up those fortunes? Is that what you are saying?"

“Not exactly.”

“Chuck, we should be going. We’re being disrespected here by Flathead and his girlfriend.”

“You and I are going to sit down and have a man to man someday.” Chuck is wearing a white T-shirt with wine dribble on it to go with his khaki pants and looks pretty bleary-eyed.

"That's really your sister?" Jane asks, as we walk free of the building.

"One of them," I say.

“Wow. She’s so much older than you.” Jane says. “How many others are there?”

“A few,” I say.

“And they’re all older, like her?”

“Two other sisters are a lot older, like her.”

“And are they like her?”

“Not exactly. They’re hard to describe.”

“Well, your mom’s sweet. I like her.”

“She’s kind of religious,” I say.

“So I see. It’s all right. I understand that.”

I don’t ask Jane what “that” is. And I don’t ask her if she has any thoughts about the name “Flathead” either. And Naomi, making a spectacle of herself, parading her life and every thought that enters her mind to strangers. I don’t know. It’s best not to think and just be grateful I’m with someone like Jane, so different from those sisters of mine.

This time I follow Jane into the hallway of her building and toward the rear. Some kids tear down the stairs and race out into the street, the front door banging open. We

kiss, the way we do now, as if each other's lips and tongues and mouths had become necessary terrain to explore.

And now footsteps are sounding on the tile floor of the hallway. We disengage quickly and just as a slender, black-haired woman appears. She wears a long wool coat excessive for the warm spring day and a pair of sunglasses. Against her chest, as if cradling it, she holds a bag. From its outline I can see that it is a bottle. For a moment, I feel that I am staring at a thinner version of my sister Naomi. The smell of drink is distinct on her breath. "Come along now, Princess. No loitering in the lobby." Her voice is soft and beautiful, unlike her words. She mounts the stairs without pausing. On the floor above, a door can be heard opening and closing.

"My dear old mom," she says, shooting her middle finger upward toward the second floor, before we kiss one last time.

"My father is a printer. He works two jobs to support us. My mom? She's pretty far gone most days by the time I get home from school. Where did they meet? In a Woolworth's, in Kansas City, where she was a salesgirl. Where did your parents meet?"

"In Central Park. Momma came from Sweden and my father from Turkey so they could be with each other."

"That's a funny way of putting it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like you're saying they came here only to meet each other."

"I guess. When you were a little girl, a real little girl, did you ever go on a swing?"

“I was always on a swing when I was a kid. Why?”

“I just wanted to know. I have this idea of you on a swing.”

“Are you OK?”

“Sure I’m OK. Are you OK?”

“I’m OK,” Jane Thayer says, putting her hand in mine.

The softball arcs downward toward home plate, like all the upperclassman’s underhand deliveries. As big as a melon the lob looks. And so it is surprising when my bat makes contact only with the air. But then, with each futile swing in my following turns at bat, the surprise falls away, and I stand in the batter’s box with the sense of inevitable failure.

The strikeouts are not in line with my image of myself on the diamond. I try to comfort myself that overhand pitches are easier for my bat to track than the slow tosses I faced on this May afternoon. It occurs to me that I may never again hit a softball sharply or hit it at all, for that matter. I am startled by the possibility that there is a huge gap between my perception of myself and my ability.

As I drag the canvas bat bag along the footpath back to school, I suddenly feel a big hand on my shoulder. A tall man is staring down at me, a half-smile trying to form on his serious face. He is Mr. Sadowski, the varsity basketball coach and also the tenth grade biology teacher.

“I want you to come out for varsity basketball next fall. I’ll be expecting you,” Mr. Sadowski says. Mr. Sadowski’s short sleeves reveal powerful, tanned arms. His left forearm has a scar that runs the length of it. It is said that Mr. Sadowski served in the Korean War and suffered horrible wounds, of which the scar on his arm is only the most visible. The wounds were such that he has to wear sweatpants, not shorts, on the

basketball court, it has also been said. The idea that he had been in combat in a strange, faraway country and has possibly come close to death only adds to my picture of him as someone who has seen more of the harsh side of life than the other faculty members.

“Sure,” I blurt, casting a fearful look up into Mr. Sadowski’s sincere and open face. A nice man, my mother would have said. A nice man with a mashed nose, as if it had been broken and never healed properly.

“I’m counting on you,” Mr. Sadowski says.

It is not for me to tell Mr. Sadowski of the fantasies his few words unleash. I am throwing in twenty-foot jump shots, like number 44, skinny Jerry West, All-American guard from the University of West Virginia Mountaineers and now a pro in the National Basketball Association. Or smooth Jerry Lucas, hub of the Ohio State Buckeyes. But beyond these fantasies of athletic stardom are feelings I cannot control. I see myself playing hard to get, coming close to Mr. Sadowski and then running away. I see myself completely ignoring Mr. Sadowski, punishing him severely by my absence and pretending the man does not exist. I find myself growing more and more conflicted by the expectation Mr. Sadowski has placed on me. Does Mr. Sadowski not know I take those words of his everywhere? Does he not know what it means to be wanted by a man?

“Is it true you’re a Negro?” The boy speaks in a whisper, as if afraid of being heard, his hand over his mouth as a muffler, or perhaps to shield me from his bad breath. Or maybe he is ashamed of his buck teeth?

“What?” I ask.

“Your nose and your lips. Eveyone says they’re so big.” The smile on the boy’s face widens. **Jackie Maltor** is no one I like very much. He has an ugly way of playing basketball, backing in on you and using his elbows till he was just under the basket for an easy turnaround shot.

“Who is everyone?” I ask.

“Just everyone.” Jackie Maltor goes on with some more of his silent chuckling.

If it had been Jackie Maltor alone, with that stupid curl hanging down on his pimply forehead like a question mark, that would be one thing. But everyone?

In my room that night, I stand in front of the full-length mirror, as my brother often does, inventorying my features. My hair is blond, my eyes are brown, my skin is white, and yet I do have a large nose—not as large as my father's, but not small either—and my lips *are* full. I try compressing them, the way I see some Negroes do, but then they just puff back to their full size. Holding a hand mirror while remaining in front of the larger mirror, I examine the back of my head, shifting the angle in the hope that the flat plane will change to a sweet roundness that so many boys are blessed with, but when the image won’t yield, I put the mirror down. “Flat-headed underweight Negro,” I finally whisper, smiling a big, wide smile.

Mr. Horvas, the librarian, has been asked to fill in as our homeroom teacher. “Thought I'd read you some real literature. Not that Alfred Lord Tennyson crap they feed you here,” he snarls. There is a tremor in his thin upper lip and cold anger in those deadly pale blue eyes dotted with pinprick pupils. The lines he reads lash us to attention:

“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by

madness
starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for
an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night..."

Mr. Horvath, when he finishes the long poem, glares out at us, as if he too, in his corduroy jacket with elbow patches and gingham shirt and knit tie, is himself an angelheaded hipster and the last word has been spoken. Mr. Horvath's anger has a life of its own.

Jackie Maltor has a sister, Lisa, who is a senior at the Claremont School. When she is not at the school she is at the West End Bar on Broadway, near Columbia, and there she drinks with the college boys, throwing back her head of blond hair and laughing fiercely. "She has more dates in a week than some of these skanks have in a year," Jackie Maltor says, his eyes ablaze with angry pride. Jackie Maltor is an outsider; his sister, too. They are not the core of who and what the school is. This I can see, somehow.

Mr. Horvath has a claim on Lisa, too. When I go to the library, she is often hovering near him. He is practiced in the art of whispering in her ear while looking at the person he is whispering about, as she does too. Or maybe he is not whispering at the person he is looking at, but only wants you to think so. And then the day comes when

Lisa is seen no more and it is rumored that Mr. Horvas is the reason, that Lisa has grown big with child, and then Mr. Horvas too is seen no more.

As the end of the school year approaches, there is only one incident that casts a shadow over the future, which has begun to look so limitless. With thoughts of summer vacation in my head, I sit at the back of the class as Mr. Arbuckle, a stubby piece of chalk in his hairy hand, puts algebra aside to speak with us about the challenges ahead. "As juniors you'll take a standardized exam called the Scholastic Aptitude Test. There are two parts, verbal and math. The aptitude test only takes three hours, but don't let its length fool you. With college admissions officers, it counts as much, and even more, than your grades over all four years of high school. What is more, you can forget right now about studying for the SAT. Basically, it is an intelligence test, and you either have the ability to do well on it or you don't."

Beyond the iron bars of the ground-floor classroom lies the schoolyard, where the branches of the tall elm are now full of leaves. The day is as sunny as my thoughts are now dark, given that Mr. Arbuckle appears to be looking directly at me while erecting this insurmountable barrier.

You get it at home. You are born with it or you aren't. That's what Princeton-educated Mr. Arbuckle, with his glazed, blubbery lips, is saying. I look at my classmates—lanky Ogden, with his poor posture, always so serenely confident; short, stocky, and serious John Edel, already a little man; and cuddly Bert Bach. My path is not theirs; a fork lies up ahead. In listening to Mr. Arbuckle hold forth on the SAT, I have begun to

hear another voice, one which comes from deep within and says, "You're not going anywhere, Flathead. Nowhere at all."

It is morning and I have woken to the sound of Luke groaning in the bunk below. But when I look, he is not in his bunk; he is on the floor.

"Luke?" I call down, but he does not respond.

On the floor beside my brother are two empty aspirin bottles. I shake him by his shoulder, but he answers with low moans.

"Could you come, Momma? It's Luke," I say, having run to the dining room.

"What is it, Gideon?" Momma says, putting down her cup of coffee.

"I don't know. He's just lying there, on the floor." I am aware of my father all the while. His brittleness. His temper. His easy disgust.

"Lying there?" Momma says, trying to comprehend.

"What is this, my son, that you come to us this way in the morning?" Are my father's words kindling for the roaring fire to come? My father is being inconvenienced, but will he be made to get up?

"Momma, it's bad," I blurt, Momma rushing from her chair as I give way to my terror.

"Such trouble, that boy. Your mother cannot even sit in peace and have her breakfast." My father stays in his chair. He has not been made to get up. He has not gone and kicked Luke in the face for aggravating him.

Momma is bending over Luke when I return to the room. "What have you done, you foolish boy?" Seeing the aspirin bottles, she says, "Good Lord. Call for an ambulance."

An ambulance. Instead of calling for one, I went rushing to Momma to make everything all right, my thoughts a blur of I have to rush but there is no point to rushing because rushing means the cruelty of hoping when there is no hope.

"He has some sickness in his head. I will pray for him," my father says, after the attendants have carried Luke out on a stretcher.

Nancy Becker. It is she who has brought my brother low, making him turn to the aspirin bottles and have his stomach pumped, she being from Riverside Drive and having all the clobber power that women are born to have.

And now it is another morning and and there is Chock Full O’Nuts, with its red and blue and green menu board in the shape of a house and the big windows that look out on Columbia University and Barnard College. Over coffee and orange juice and a sugar doughnut, served me by a solemn-faced Negro woman, I read in the *Daily News* about the fleet feet of Maury Wills and Willie Davis and the power hitting of Tommy Davis and the overwhelming stuff of Drysdale and Koufax. The Dodgers are pulling away, and my world is as right as the bright sun in the blue sky on this early summer day.

Down and down One Hundred Sixteenth Street I go, past the massive curving apartment buildings on either corner of Riverside Drive. At the entrance to the lower level of the park I come to a water fountain, the inscription faded on its limestone backing, and follow the carriage path along a curving set of steps, at the bottom of which Jane is waiting, in her cutoff jeans.

Only a four-foot fence stands between us and Dead Man's Hill. I climb over and Jane follows. For a moment she totters at the top before falling forward.

In the level area before the hill, partially hidden by foliage, stands a wire cage, enclosed at the top, and big enough for a person to stand in. In the center is a water bowl fixed to the cement floor. Is it a bird bath? I don't know. It is a mystery from another time, when the park had a more unspoiled stamp on it.

"Let's go in," I say, and close the door behind us.

"Now let's go out," she says, after we have kissed.

"We can't," I say.

"What do you mean, we can't? Let's go."

"We're stuck. There's no way out."

"Stop being a jerk. I don't like it in here."

"Liking it is not the point. Once you're in, you're in. You stay until they come and take you away."

"Who are *they*?"

"They? People who stick their feet out and trip you and knock you into a ditch. People who get themselves in front of you and then stall you. You mean you don't know who they are?"

"You can have your *they*. I'm getting out of here." She opens the latch on the door, steps out, and shows a triumphant smile. "Well?" she says, our faces separated by the wire now.

"Goodbye, Jane. They've got me. They're taking me far, far down." I let my voice trail off.

"Look. Cut this crap out or I'm leaving."

"Okay. Okay. But give me a minute, will you? These people are not easy to get away from." I make as if I am struggling mightily to break free. "Whew," I say, when I have fought my way through the door. "Close call. Real close call."

"Not funny. Not funny at all," she says, taking my hand.

No. Not funny. Not funny at all.

"Well, what are you seeing?" It is an hour later. We have been having our splendor in the grass. Kissing and more kissing. Endless kissing. The kissing taking a life of its own. I run a blade of grass along her cheek and above her top lip.

"You. I'm seeing you," I say, seeing her green eyes and her bangs and her lightly freckled face. "I love you," I whisper. They are not extreme words. They are not the same as saying, "I want to marry you someday." I am just saying what is true. She is not like my older sisters. She is perfect. She is as normal as her name.

Only when she touches my head with her hand do I feel tense. Only then does my heart almost stop. Does she not know my fear that she will suddenly see me as I am and jump up and say, "What the hell is the meaning of this flatness?" before running away? Has she not heard the names that I have been called? Has she not been listening?

We are faithful to Dead Man's Hill throughout the summer. Only when it rains and rains do we stay away. It is what I live for, the morning light and *The Daily News* and the Los Angeles Dodgers and Chock Full O'Nuts and then Jane Thayer coming down from One Hundred Twenty-second Street to be with me on the grass for a couple of hours.

There are men who come to Dead Man's Hill as well. Spies. Love spies. They kneel in the tall grass and can be heard moving in the brush before they are seen. When I

look up, they duck. When I return my attention to Jane, they rise once again out of their crouches.

To see them is to see some aspect of myself, the younger boy who would stare for an hour out the window hoping to glimpse a female tenant half-naked in her bra in her room across the courtyard. The men are only doing what Jerry and I have done, watching as the Columbia men lay in the grass with their Barnard girlfriends. They are some part of myself I cannot repudiate, so long as they are not dangerous.

And I have read about these men in the pulp pages of the pornographic novels filched from the racks in the luncheonette by sandwiching them into the centerfold section of the *Daily News*, terrified that Lev will see in my eyes that I am taking away more than I should for the five cents I am leaving on the counter. There is Freddie, the hero of one such novel with a full-color cover of a woman in erotic lingerie. He stands before the mirror admiring his giant cock with only one thought in his head: to give the day over to finding a woman who will satisfy his every sexual fantasy. They are not books on the summer reading list or for reading on the Broadway bus. No these are novels to be read behind a locked bathroom door.

She has bounds she keeps me within, braking my hand when it moves too far up her thigh or toward her full breasts. Looking to my left, I see a man with a newspaper withdraw behind the thick trunk of a tree. I turn back to Jane, wondering that I don't entirely mind the man's peeping Tom presence and surprised by the possible corruption that lies within.

Like a weed I have grown in these hot summer months to an even six feet, the added six inches only stretching me thinner. Chock Full O' Nuts presents a bruising reality. The back wall is one large mirror, and the columns by each of the several counters have mirrors that show my Adam's apple bulging enormously from a sliver of a neck. I tell myself that the harsh fluorescent lighting and the quality of the glass must be responsible for the unappealing reflection. And yet how beautiful some others are when I see their images in the mirror. Oh, you know you are really something when you look good in a Chock Full O' Nuts mirror.

"Hey look, here comes lover boy," Scully announces, holding a broomstick bat.

"Where the hell you been, man? Do I have to go and kick your ass to get the truth?" Jimmy Riley demands to know, going chest to chest with me, but there is no real threat in his tough talk. It is only a comic expression of joy, as if the direct expression of affection would simply overwhelm him. Or if I hear what he says another way, it is a kind of self-annihilating wildness he is being called to. He is Irish and he is poor, one of the tortured ones in the scolding parochial school fold, and like me, bone thin. But Scully, with that Porky Pig body and sly lynx face, is another matter. Scully has all that weight and the malevolent intent to place it on top of you.

Luis draws a box with chalk to represent a one-size-fits-all home plate on the windowless wall of the Interchurch Building. Across the street stands Riverside Church and a short ways beyond is Grant's Tomb. Mornings on Dead Man's Hill with Jane; afternoons on this strip of One Hudnred Twentieth Street with the boys from Scully's stoop.

And if now and then cars come along and disrupt our game on the lightly trafficked street, where is the problem? We have everything we need for our happiness on the asphalt playing field: ball, bat, smokes, bottles of Pepsi, and each other.

A boy named Rob Koley is on the mound. His skin, even in winter, holds the sun, and his deep-set eyes, ringed with darkness, show a fire burning. He is from a country called South Africa, another world, and lives with his mother in a single-room occupancy.

For however long he has been in this country, Rob has picked up some of the basic mechanics of baseball. He pitches out of a neat, compact windup and throws a curveball that breaks sharply.

"You're out of your fucking mind. That pitch was right on the corner. Where are your eyes, man?" He comes forward holding the ball in his hand, eager to show Scully the chalk mark where the Spalden has hit the corner of the box. You get used to Rob Koley having fits, choking on his indignation, veins bulging in his thick neck and his voice getting squeaky high at the raw deal life is handing him. You get as used to it as you do the small puddle at his feet from the spit that shoots from his mouth after each drag on his Marlboro.

Scully looks at Rob with a wiseass grin. "Hey guys, you hear what Koley just said. He said his mother is on the corner and goes down for wooden nickels."

Rob's mother is tall and blond and has a figure that has Mr. Funelli always talking about wanting to personally deliver groceries to her door. "You fat cocksucker, Scully," Rob shouts, and throws a high hard one, the Spalden bouncing off Scully's forehead.

"Your ass is mine," Scully says. Rob ducks the broomstick Sully slings toward him. Like a rotating blade, it sails over his head and lands on the other side of the street. But

Scully is not done. He makes a berserk rhino charge. He may weigh about a hundred pounds more than Rob but he can scoot short distances. He just bellies Rob off his feet and onto the street, the driver of an oncoming car narrowly averting them, and is giving Rob bip bop until everyone, though mostly Luis, pulls him off.

“Like a fucking elevator she goes down,” Scully goes.

“Fuck you, Scully. Your mother’s so fat she can’t fit in a fucking elevator. She’s so fat no one wants to fuck her, except you,” Rob Koley goes, the two of them held apart by Luis.

“Oh, shit. You see what I see. Scully’s ass is sticking out of his fucking pants. Look at that big fat ugly ass,” Jimmy Riley, goes, giving us some of his mechanical laughter.

Sean turns the corner, walking with a swagger, a black San Francisco Giants cap with an orange beak and lettering sitting tentatively on his huge head. He is alone, as he always is, just appearing out of nowhere, as if he is the mystery man of the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Another game gets going. Sean doesn’t throw the ball; he heaves it. His pitches come in on a straight line and are easy to lay wood on. Luis pitches flames. His ball hops and dips as it explodes into the box.

But Sean can swing the bat. Coming out of a low crouch from the left side he sends ropes in all directions and huge home runs high off the building across the street. Not even Luis, who pitches for Bishop DuBois, can get much past him.

Sean. He can manage to be with us for a game, but then he has to be gone, off on his own to do whatever it is that he is doing.

I manage to slam one of Sean's pitches into home run territory to fuel my fantasies. But then there comes the moment when Scully calls out, as I stand at the plate, "Hey, which of you is the bat?" to bring me back to earth.

I don't drop the broomstick and run off and cry. In fact, I ding a single. But Scully's words hang out there, stopping time, and it is as if everyone is looking through me, seeing that I have no defense except silence.

"The Giants are going to catch that team of yours. I don't care how far in front they are. We'll get them," Sean says, that same afternoon, blowing smoke from his Philip Morris in my face and laughing maniacally. He has come to know where my identification lies. It is understood what Sean is saying. The Giants are brute and savage strength. They are the tiger leaping on the back of the zebra and sinking its teeth in its prey's neck.

Sometimes I hold Sean in my thoughts and smile. Other times, like now, I inwardly tremble. I do not want to be beaten by Sean. I do not want him on top, not even in a proxy war. If the Dodgers win, the sun is shining. If they lose, it is dark no matter what the sun is doing. They are angels of light, their speed and their pitching keeping them on top. They are Koufax, his right knee grazing the mound as he delivers, the top button of his uniform shirt undone—his fastball accelerating through the strike zone and his curve swooping in at the batter's head and breaking on the black at his knees. They are mean Don Drysdale, number 53, coming from third base with his sidearm delivery to claim the inside of the plate and keep the right-handed batters honest. They are Maury Wills, agitating the pitcher with his arrogant strut off first.

“That’s right, baby. They’re going to fuck those pussies up. My man Juan Marichal. He’s got the five kinds of fastball like you wouldn’t believe,” Luis chimes in, simulating, or trying to, that high kick of Marichal as he comes toward home plate with the pitch but getting his big leg no higher than his hip.

Sean has a history with the Giants, going back to the Polo Grounds up on One Hundred Fifty-Fifth Street, and the fact that the franchise fled New York for San Francisco at the end of the 1957 season does not change things. The Giants are Juan Marichal, but they are also Willie Mays and Orlando “Baby Bull” Cepeda and Willie “Stretch” McCovey. And they are the Alou brothers, slap-hitting Matty and power-hitting Felipe, of the twitching neck.

“Look at him smiling,” Sean says to Luis. “But we know he’s shitting a brick.”

It is like that sometimes with the kids from Scully’s stoop. I want to be friends with them, but I’m not sure it is possible. And yet there is no place else to go.

The room has grown cloudy from cigarette smoke, and the beer and scotch are going fast. The street below looks far away and the people tiny. Two blocks north and on the other side of Broadway the verse of scripture on my family’s building glows in the soft summer night, the gothic lettering and the pastel colors and the classical columns that frame it giving the mural a kind of beauty.

So proclaiming we are. So something.

A key turns in the front door lock and soon we see through the ajar door of Kevin’s room a woman appear in the hallway. Haggard and gray-haired, she uses the wall as a support to slowly make her way deeper into the apartment. With her free arm she clutches a brown bag and her pocketbook. In the sort of alcohol and cigarettes voice I

have heard before, she shouts, "Hey, Hank, are you coming or what, goddammit?" and curses when the contents of her pocketbook spill out on the floor.

"I'm coming, for Christ's sake. You left your damn key in the lock." A gangly, stoop-shouldered man carrying a bag with clanking bottles soon follows after the woman.

"You fucking kids. What the fuck you think you're doing? Why aren't you out getting laid like I was when I was your age? Better yet, why don't you all just jump out the window?"

"Stop being such a goddamn pain in the ass, Hank. Leave my boy and his friend alone."

"He's my boy, too."

"You don't have a boy, Hank. You don't even have yourself. Now come on in here, I say."

"Damn," Luis says, after Hank withdraws, but nothing more. No one sounds on Kevin about his mother and stepfather, not even Scully. They pretend not to see or hear them, as if Kevin's mother and stepfather are just people of the shadows with their load on.

"Sometimes things get fucked up," Jimmy Riley says.

"Ain't nothing fucked up. Why you want to sound deep when you ain't deep?" Luis goes.

"I didn't say I was deep. I said things sometimes get fucked up."

"You fucked up. You fucked up on beer and Scotch," Luis goes.

"A-fucking right I'm fucked up, and I'm going to get fucked up some more."

"How about you, Rob? You and that mother of you fucked up?" Scully goes.

“The only thing fucked up here is that big fat fucking ass of yours,” Rob goes.

“How about I sit my big fat fucking ass on your little fucking face?” Scully goes.

“That ain’t going to happen here, Scully,” Kevin goes.

“A man has a right to ask for respect in his own house,” Luis says, in his I’m-not-playing voice.

“How about you start wearing your mother’s bra. Your tits are big enough,” Rob goes.

“How about I wear your mother’s bra instead? Or how about I wear Jane’s bra? You think Jane would let me wear her bra, Gideon?” Scully goes.

“Come on, Scully. That ain’t right, asking Gideon shit like that about his girlfriend,” Jimmy Riley goes.

“I’m not asking to suck her tits. I’m just asking to wear her bra,” Scully goes.

“Damn, Scully, how about letting me suck your fucking tits, since you got bigger ones than anyone,” Jimmy goes.

“You can suck something else, the same thing the Head gives you to suck,” Scully goes.

There have been stories about Sean and some of the neighborhood kids, stories that Sean himself has spread about kids visiting him while his parents were out and what they do in the dark.

“Ain’t no one wants to suck your ugly old dick, you best believe,” Jimmy goes.

I have moved away from the window and onto the floor, where I lie missing the softness of Jane. They make a summer night in Manhattan feel like the winter coldness of Siberia, but I have the beer and the scotch to keep me warm and ease the feelings of

alienation. Such feelings have no place in this small room, where everyone is at risk of exposure. No, it is best that they not see me for the stranger that I am.

I am in a time in my life when I do not know the cost of being lost in the endless softness of Momma without the bracing firmness of the father who says, “You, you’re coming with me. I will have you listen to something other than the cries and whispers and longings and sorrows of women. I will pitch your ear to the sound of the lion as well as the dove. I will freeze your face with ice where it has been burned by fire.”

The small building has a history and needs attention. It stands on the east side of Broadway and houses an Esso gas station and a garage offering refuge from the scorching heat. The manly smell of oil and gas and rubber commingle. Outside, a mansized boy with an idiot’s grin stands revving his imaginary engine. Vrrroom, vroom, he says, his body beginning to vibrate. He then tears off, his right shoulder lowered and his head leaning forward.

The two garage attendants call the boy Bobby. It is something to note that though they live in the world of inanimate objects, they have love in their hearts for him. They do not talk down to Bobby or in any way make fun of him. They have claimed him as one of their own.

It is outside this garage that Jane says to me, “I’ll be going away this weekend.”

“Going away where?” I ask.

“To New Jersey with my church group.”

She belongs to some Friday night social group at Riverside Church. It is where she goes without me, and where I understand not to follow.

“Why?”

“Because I want to. It will be fun.”

“What kind of fun?”

“Boating. Swimming. Lots of stuff.”

Jane Thayer has knocked me down. It had never occurred to me that we would ever be apart.

"Can I call you?"

"No, you can't call me." She laughs, as if it is some silly idea. Then, seeing how worried I look, she adds, "It's only for the weekend, you know. It's not like I'm going away for a year."

But that is the point. It feels like a year. It feels like forever.

"What's the matter, Gideon? Miss Jane? Did she find herself another boyfriend?" Scully has tuned in to my fear. It is a Saturday night, and we have gone on to the south lawn of Columbia University, where we sit drinking beer poured from quart bottles into paper cups.

“She’s away with her church group for the weekend,” I say. Every minute of the day she has been on my mind. The focus has been unrelenting, as if she were my universe. I feel like an asthma victim gasping for air.

“Means she’s up there fucking one of those church boys,” Scully says.

The campus is peaceful, with just a scattering of summer school students. The smell of the freshly mowed grass is strong. How soothing the beer is; I pour out more and

more into the paper cup. Soon Scully's grating voice pounds less in my ears. The voices of the others—Jimmy Riley and Luis and Jerry---seem farther away.

“Damn, Sam. Who drank all the fucking beer?”

As if from another world, Luis's voice comes to me. By now I am some yards away, on my knees and leaning into the hedges that border the lawn. So sick. Oh, Jesus, I won't ever again....So much vomiting. On and on. How good to just lie there in the cool grass when it is over. Someone—it could only be Scully—saying Jane won't be kissing me now.

But in the morning the pain is waiting for me. I lie with my arms pressed against my stomach, trying to squeeze the anxiety out of me. Luke is away again, doing construction work on the nun's property in Westchester. That is a good thing. It would not do to be lovesick in the same room with my older brother.

What has happened to the clocks, that the hour hand moves so slowly? It is an eternity before six pm arrives and I am sitting at the fountain in the Whelan's drugstore, sipping a vanilla coke in a glass of crushed ice. Can I call? Can I finally call? Is it not time for her to be home? How slow, how deliberately slow, the Coca-Cola wall clock is.

I rush for the phone, enclose myself in the booth, and spin the rotary dial. I must have relief. I must. "Well, hello there, Tiger. No, Jane is not back yet, but we expect her any minute. You just hang on." There is playfulness as well as refinement in the voice of Jane's mother.

The counterman wears a bowtie with his tight white shirt, from which he looks about to burst. A white paper hat sits askew atop his head. He brings me a second vanilla coke. "Jimmy," his nameplate reads. The smile he wears is genuine. He banters with

everyone. "Are you here again, woman? Is it that you like me some little bit?" he says to a plump Negro woman." He too is Negro and from one of the Caribbean islands, if his accent means anything.

"You go on now and get me a cup of coffee and never mind about liking you," the woman scolds, and he only laughs. How? How does he come by that smile, that laugh?

After that amused rebuff from Jane's mother, I resolve to let another half hour pass before picking up the phone, but in less than half that time I am headed back toward the booth. But now here is Naomi coming toward me, with her daughter Jeanne in tow. A button-eyed girl of nine she is, with that fixed sullen stare.

"Aren't you going to say hello to my daughter?"

"Hi, Jeanne."

"Please call her Abigail Jeanne. Be respectful of my daughter."

"Hi, Abigail Jeanne," I say, not asking why a girl in New York City should have a Southern-sounding name.

"Now say hello to your uncle. Say 'Hello, Uncle Gideon.'"

"Hello, Uncle Gideon," Abigail Jeanne says, with no great enthusiasm.

"Respect is important, and you haven't had enough of it, Gideon."

"Yes?" I say.

"You see. It's in your tone of voice. It's in everything you do. Always like you're better than everyone else. Pretending you're from a different tree when you aren't."

"I—"

"You don't have to try to defend yourself, and it wouldn't do any good anyway. Do you know why I am here? More than that, do you even care?"

“Tell me why you’re here.”

“There you go again. But I will tell you anyway. I'm here for some medicine because I've been feeling blue and need a little something to pick me up. My doctor gave me this prescription. Do you know what he says to me? He says I'm an interesting woman with a lot in me. Do you know what that means? That means he has a lot of confidence in me. Ma doesn't believe in psychiatrists. She says they turn you against the word of God, but this one is saving my life.”

Her slow, monotone delivery and heavy-lidded eyes tell me she is probably drugged right then. It seems unfair that I should have to run into her when in the throes of powerful anxiety.

“I’ve got to make a phone call,” I say.

“Uncle Mark looks upset, doesn’t he, Abigail Jeanne? What's the matter, brother-wuther? Are you having trouble with that girlfriend of yours? Is it anything you want to tell big sister?”

“I’m not having any trouble,” I say.

“Why don't you come next door to the Earvin Bar? Chuck's in there waiting for Abigail Jeanne and me. He just got paid his salary by Auntie Eve. It takes a real man to sit in that lobby at night and protect the tenants from the forces of evil out there. Maybe we could even get the bartender to serve you. A few drinks might help.”

“No, thank you,” I say.

Through the glass panel of the closed door of the phone booth I watch my sister shuffle over to the pharmacy counter, moving as slowly as she talks. How fat Naomi has

gown. And that shapeless blue dress. And that little white prescription she clutches in her hand. And Abigail Jeanne staring back at me, as if somehow it is all my fault.

My only feelings for Naomi are bad ones, as if all she has been put in this life to do is to be a roadblock and source of humiliation. I don't like her. I don't like her husband. I don't like her daughter. I want her to go away but Momma says she is not going away. I want her to die and for the rich dirt of the earth to be thrown on her so order can be restored. I want her out of my sight so I don't have to see my future in front of me. But Momma, Momma and her love, her enveloping love. Momma.

I drop a dime in the slot and spin the rotary dial.

"You are a passionate and impetuous young man, are you not? You just you're your ardor on hold, young man. The damsel will be arriving soon, no doubt."

I place the receiver back on the hook. Is Mrs. Thayer laughing at me? I feel soreness coming over me, as if Jane is delaying her return on purpose just to thwart and humiliate me.

Now I don't even try to stay away from the phone for a half hour. If Jane wants to stall me, just stall me, I'll show her mother how bad I can look. Scully is right. Jane has found somebody else.

"Hello?" There she is, on the line, her voice removing my soreness.

"Hi. I called..."

"My mom told me," she says, not letting me finish.

"So did you have a good time?"

"It was great."

"I missed you."

"I was only gone two days."

"So can you come out tonight?"

"Well, my parents want me to stay home tonight."

"Come on. Just for a little while." There have been two days of separation. I don't want it to get out of hand.

"I'll check," she says, and puts down the receiver. When she comes back, she says, "Well, all right. Daddy says I can see you for a little while after supper."

That evening we sit on a bench in the quadrangle of the Jewish Theological Seminary on Broadway, down the block from her building. I am too angry to smile.

"I missed you," I say again, giving her another chance.

"Boy, some of those kids are snotty jerks," she says.

"Maybe we shouldn't see each other anymore."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter. I've just been thinking about it."

"You've just been thinking about it?"

"That's right."

I walk off, just like that, hoping she is in real pain for the things she has been doing to me, even as I know she hasn't been doing anything to me at all. Everything is a blur—the traffic, the streets, the buildings. I only wonder if there is a way to punish her more.

For a while I sit on the sundial on the Columbia University mall, the fear spreading that I could lose her, and the next thing I'm sprinting for the phone booth outside of

Chock Full O’Nuts. "I'm sorry," I say, staring through the window at the empty stools in the closed eatery.

"It's all right."

“What’s that mean, it’s all right?” I am not hearing forgiveness, not the way I need to hear it.

"Really, Gideon, it's all right."

“I said I’m sorry. Do I have to die? Is that it?”

“Stop being so dramatic.”

“You think I’m being dramatic?”

“You’re being something.”

At home that night I can’t be sure my apology has been enough. Maybe, to seal our closeness, it is necessary to speak with her once again. I struggle to stay in bed, but can’t stop myself from getting dressed and going downstairs to the luncheonette.

"Please, Gideon. It's late. This is very silly," Jane says. “No more calls.”

Later, I lie in bed imagining a conversation in which Mrs. Thayer, in a motherly moment, says to Jane, "Perhaps there is something wrong with him. Perhaps he is not quite right for you." I put my hands to my head, just keep them there for a while, then hold myself tight.

The summer is just the summer. I do not know that I will look back on it with affection, as a time of innocence about love. I do not know that I will never again lie on Dead Man's Hill with Jane, that this period of ours together is a closed chapter, or that those months will grow more special in my mind with the passage of time.

If some are blessed with a natural perseverance, an ability to move forward without a frantic search for the exit sign, I am not one of them. I want to be able to sit at the counter at Chock Full O’Nuts and pore over baseball box scores in the *Daily News* while drinking coffee and munching on a sugar doughnut. I want the fields of play, the park bench where I can sit in sunlight all by myself.

Alarm bells are sounding as I flip through the bulky textbook. Phyla, bacteria, protozoa, chloroplasts, mitochondria, meiosis, mitosis. Lab work? Messy, gruesome dissections? What world is this where order does not prevail? No one must threaten my dream. No one must place a barrier on my path. No one. There will be no easy A; there can only be a hard-won C. No one must be allowed to blemish my virtually perfect record. And no one must be allowed to see into this mind that has no substantial working parts.

And there is the matter of Mr. Sadowski, the athletic coach who dared to show an interest in me last spring. Does he know how those few words have bound me to him and that he has grown to the size of a Thanksgiving Day parade balloon in my consciousness? To learn now that Mr. Sadowski will be teaching tenth grade biology is more than my mind can tolerate. To enter his classroom would be to enter the scene of the crime. It is not simply that Mr. Sadowski wears shirts with frayed collars and dull ties and has to work a summer job doing construction. There is a poverty of mind that goes along with the paucity of material blessings; surely he is as plain as his face and those ill-fitting suits he wears. Surely Ogden Connifer and Bert Bach and John Edel and Diane Coleman and Robin Abel will put their laughing thing on him as he fumbles his way through each class.

And there is Jane. The course will require too much of me. I won't have as much time with her.

One minute I have decided to stay with the course; the next, I have decided to ditch it. It goes this way for a week, my mind not leaving me alone.

"If you withdraw from the class, you'll only be taking four courses? A number of your classmates will be taking five? You understand that, of course?" It is one week later and I have gone to see Miss Redding, the assistant to the principal. She has a Southern accent and everything she says is in the form of a question. I make an effort to keep my eyes on her face, not her cleavage.

"Yes," I say.

"Why would you drop this course? You know that a science course is required for you to go on to college?"

"I have to."

"Why do you have to?"

"I just do."

She pulls my folder from the file cabinet and makes a note. "Don't start running from things," she says, lifting her big green eyes to me and doing away with the question marks.

That afternoon I head up to Scully's stoop. The weight is off me. There had been a scare, but now all the lights on the road ahead are shining green. Still, four courses, when Diane and Robin and John and Ogden and Bert are taking five. It is something not to think about.

In the distance, along Amsterdam Avenue, two boys approach, moving at a fast clip. One is a stocky blond kid, handsome, the other a darker boy, also handsome but wiry.

"Holy shit. It's Patty Joyce and Chao," Kevin announces, as if the main event of our lives has arrived.

The pair turn into the liquor store two doors down from Funelli's grocery. The next minute they are burning rubber back down the block, Patty Joyce holding a bottle of whiskey by the neck. Down past the Cathedral of St. John the Divine they speed to the turmoil of Manhattan Valley, where the Irish and the Puerto Ricans are thrown together.

"Damn. That Joyce is crazy. He has it made with a full basketball scholarship to Archbishop Molloy," Kevin says, referring to a Catholic high school out in Queens, while outside his liquor store, the owner, a small man with glasses and wearing a blue smock, stands fuming.

I imagine them on some rooftop breaking the seal on the bottle and chugging the alcohol. Oh, to have that kind of beauty and talent to be reckless with.

"You like to kiss. I can tell. You have those nice full lips," Mr. Funelli says to me that afternoon, when I come into his store.

"He can use them for more than kissing," Sean says.

"Don't you fucking kids block everything up. I've got business to take care of," Mr. Funelli growls, when Kevin and Luis and Jimmy Riley also enter, though the store, as usual, is without any customers. Mr. Funelli follows us as we move to the rear, clustering, near the leaky toilet.

"Any of you so much as touch that bottle and you're dead. Got it? That is vintage wine," Mr. Funelli says, giving us as menacing a stare as he can with his bug eyes as he points to a bottle on the shelf.

"Telling us not to drink his sorry-assed wine," Jimmy Riley says, when Mr. Funelli hurries to the front before the customer who has entered can escape. "Shit. Are we going to listen to that fat Wop?"

I reach for the dark green bottle and pull the cork. Wine can't be this salty. I quickly spit it out. He quickly spit it out. My friends are laughing as Mr. Funelli comes running to the back of the store. Where is his rage? He is laughing, too. "You drank piss. You drank piss, you sucker." He puts his grizzled face right next to mine. "Piss breath," he says.

"You greedy fuck," Sean says to me.

"You're not going to kiss for a while now, are you? You don't want to be kissing with your mouth smelling of piss."

And now the front door rattles open and here is Jane, come for her grandmother's bunch of carrots. "Did your boyfriend here tell you he likes to drink piss?"

Jane's face shows confusion even as she smiles, so Jimmy tells her. "You're kidding," she says, laughing in amazement.

"Yeah. Ugly old Funelli's piss, too," Scully says.

"Gross," Jane said.

Two men are playing a match on the enclosed clay court just beyond John Jay Hall on the Columbia campus. John Jay. Alexander Hamilton. The school one with America. They

look tanned and fit in their tennis whites. Lots of serving but not many extended volleys. Are they professors? They must be to have the use of the court. And those big foreheads and powerful, well-shaped heads mean something. Another world, the world of strength and fitness and intellect. The authoritative sound of the racket striking the ball, generally soothing, now is unpleasant, a torment. How do men shield themselves from the pain of life sufficient to hit a ball back and forth? And how do his classmates dissect frogs in a cold laboratory?

"You like them, don't you?"

"Who?"

"You don't know?" he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't know what I'm talking about?"

"No, I don't. I don't like this."

"You can tell me the truth. It's OK." My voice steady and reasonable, like the the sound of the rackets striking the ball.

"Look, cut it out." She points a finger to show she means business.

"The truth is an important thing."

"Your being a jerk is an important thing."

I follow her flight up the stairs beyond the mall past Alma Mater, then lose her as she disappears past squat Low Library with its massive dome.

That evening I place seven calls to her home from the luncheonette. Every one of them is needed, not merely to make up with her but to reach that perfect level of harmony, anything short of which is too uncomfortable to bear.

“Not good. Not good,” Lev says, raising his face from the newspaper he has spread out by the cash register.

“No. Not good at all,” I say. The Dodgers are fading, like the warm rays of summer, and the Giants are closing fast. Don Drysdale is having his best year, Maury Wills is closing in on one hundred stolen bases, and Tommy Davis, from Boys' High in Brooklyn, is hitting a ton, and yet they can't shake that team from the bay area.

There reasons not to like the Giants. The orange and black caps are an unfriendly combination. And that right-hander of theirs, Blackjack Sanford, a mediocrity having an amazing season, and the insolent supremacy of Marichal, with his high leg kick and five varieties of fastball. And the hugeness of Willie McCovey and the meanness of the Baby Bull, Orlando Cepeda—the name is all wrong, too, the syllables like rocks that have tumbled down onto the road.

Accompanying the collapse is the harsh, jeering laughter of Sean, erupting from a mouth full of ham and cole slaw, as if he has known all along that the Dodgers—and me—would crumble. As if he was saying, "I'll let you preen for a while. I'll let you have your day, but the ending will be all my way."

There is that recurring dream from my childhood, in which I make eye contact with a figure far away. Though he means me no good, fear roots me to the spot as he closes in.

“I will run you down. I will always run you down,” I hear Sean thinking.

So when Billy Pierce throws so hard and fast from the left side in the first playoff game—so hard and fast for a thirty-five-year-old supposedly past his prime—and just

shuts the Dodgers down completely, and it is so hard for LA to pull out the second game, I sense that even the two-run lead they take into the ninth inning of the final game will not save them because the power and inevitability of the Giants—of Sean—is real. As he sit at home watching Stan Williams of the Dodgers walk across the winning run on TV, I hear Sean's mocking laughter from a block away.

"What a bunch of pussies that team of yours is. You got beat. You got whipped," Sean says, that same day.

"It would have been different if Koufax hadn't been injured," I say.

"All you've got is excuses. You got your ass whipped. That's all." And then, in a lower voice, penetrating and knowing, punctuated by another burst of laughter, he adds, "And there's more ass whipping to come."

I cannot deal with Sean with words. I will have to do so with distance.

You can buy the *Daily News* or filch erotic novels or make phone calls at Lev's luncheonette, but you must not eat the food. The meat is bad and the hands of the stringy Puerto Rican counterwoman Lev has hired are unclean. How I know this to be so I cannot say, but it is a qualm I cannot negotiate. What I can do is drink the egg creams, chocolate and vanilla, or sip a Coke, with a squirt of cherry and vanilla syrup, as I am doing when the man enters, snatches up a *Times*, and looks back at me through the plate-glass window as he leaves.

The man is not any man. He has eyes that start a commotion going. I spill some coins on the counter and rush outside and there he still is, staring in that significant way before turning down the side street. I begin to count silently, and when I reach fifty-

Mississippi, I too turn the corner. Bulldog Harry Frug has a “Hi, Gideon, how ya doing?” for me as he stands outside his radio shop, but now is not the time for dawdling.

Halfway down the street, the man stops and turns once again, before disappearing down the hill. When I follow, he is standing, keys in hand, halfway down the hill on the front steps of a walkup building.

The carpeted stairs creak as I mount them and enter a high-ceilinged studio apartment and lie naked on his bed. Quickly, the man too undresses. Removing his Jockey shorts, he reveals a long penis thick and stiff as a baton. I move toward it, as if it is the object of my lifelong desire. I hear the man groan. Now he is kissing me all over my body, but I recoil when he comes near my face.

When the fever passes, I see what I hadn't seen, that the man, who remains naked, is overweight and has hair on his shoulders and back as well as his chest. I see too that the man's feet are big, his toenails discolored, and that bright red pimples dot his too-white ass.

I spend many afternoons in the man's bed. When the thought comes, I go to him. I want the sex. I do not want to see the man with the hairy body and pasty skin and those pimples. But I do see him, more and more, and as I do the sexual frenzy becomes a low fire, and then the fire is banked and there is only the frightening loneliness of the man's company. The man and Jane. It is the difference between a cold cell and a warm room.

His name is Allan. He was born in something called Shaker Heights, Ohio. He has an older sister. He teaches English literature at the Columbia School of General Studies while seeking his Ph.D. at the same university. So he tells me.

In the aftermath of each encounter I disappear the sex in my mind; it is a thing apart from Jane that I just do. If anything, it feels like a triumph, something I can give myself. If my mind tells me to go and my body tells me to go, then who am I not to go?

What bothers me is foolish talk, like telling Allan that Princeton is a college I hope to attend. It is the kind of talk that later makes me turn my face to the wall in shame that I should have stood far more naked before Allan than I do with my clothes off. Those Princeton words I spoke are not good words. They reveal a dream I cannot realize, and any chance I had of achieving it is now gone because of the pressure I have placed on myself. It is not good to not know your place, stupid Gideon, I hear myself say, and hear Mr. Arbuckle as well about the SAT and how there is no possibility of preparing for it.

And then, to my surprise, the sex is bothering me. Not the sex itself, but what it signifies for me and Jane.

"Am I going to be this way forever? Will it get stronger in me so that I won't be able to be with girls?" Because I am now fearful that, like an undertow, this sometime urge will take me far out to sea and away from Jane.

We have gone to Riverside Park for a walk after a brief rain. Leaves lie plastered underfoot on the hexagonal tiles. Streetlamps glow in the crisp fall darkness, and high above, the lights in the apartment buildings along the drive are warm and fetching.

Allan does not put the laughing thing on me, as Sean would do. "No. I don't think so at all. What will probably happen is that you will go along for months without thinking of homosexual sex and then you will be standing in the lobby of a hotel, say, and you will make eye contact with another man, and the desire will be instantly in you again

and you will act on it, and then some more months will pass and there will be no more of that desire until the next time. No, I wouldn't be concerned," Allan says. There is gentleness and understanding in his voice as he reassures me I will not have to spend the rest of my life in a cold room without the company of women.

Until the next time. I picture Jane and me married and staying at a hotel. One afternoon, she stays back in the room and I encounter someone in the lobby. That look is exchanged and I go to the man's room, and then I return to Jane "until the next time." A cry of resolve rises in me. Nothing but nothing must come between Jane and me and our future together. Nothing.

As I turn the corner a black Cadillac with two big fins is pulling up outside the building. Small, wiry Simon Weill steps out, leaving behind in the passenger seat a heavily made up woman with platinum blond hair. He wears a full-length leather coat. It goes with his thinning black hair and pencil mustache and the rigor of his face.

"What's the matter, Gideon? See a ghost?" Bulldog Harry Frug has stepped from his TV and radio store.

"No. No ghost."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure." Harry Frug's voice has a raspy jeer to it. His words anger me, in a way that I feel I cannot show.

"That's a nice-looking car parked outside the building. You need a lot of money to buy a set of wheels like that. You've got to be a success in the world," Harry Frug says, nodding toward the sleek vehicle with the white-wall tires.

"I know where there is a whorehouse, Gideon. Do you want to go? Because we can have ourselves some fun. They have some of the very finest women in the city at this establishment," Jerry says.

"Finest women? Establishment? "

"That's what I was told." Jerry fans his hand to show his excitement.

"Who told you?"

"Let's just say I have my sources."

Someone has to be present in the renting office during the day to sort and distribute the mail to anxious tenants, handle queries from prospective tenants, and receive and record the rent payments. It is not work Momma cares for. She needs to be free to show rooms to prospective tenants and to assist with the washing and distribution of bedding and towels. She isn't someone to be tethered to that small, confining space eight hours a day. And it is hard to imagine Auntie Eve, given her age and level of distraction, handling the position.

It takes a person of a certain temperament such as Alice Greene possesses. There she is now, slowly and methodically writing out a rent receipt, taking money, and giving back change to a tenant in the queue.

"I would like my post, please. Patel, in 9C4," a sari-clad woman says, speaking that precise foreigner's English that can be heard all around the building. She has a red dot in the middle of her forehead, a pretty and exotic woman among the blur of foreign faces.

Mrs. Greene stands up and peers into the boxes on the wall and extracts the mail for the ninth floor, flipping through the pile carefully, giving each letter her full scrutiny.

More and more tenants stream to the window, Pakistanis and Indians and Nigerians wearing gloves and scarves and heavy coats as a buffer against the fall cold. Returning from jobs or school, they are frantic to have their mail before the office closed. Really what they are hoping for are those personal letters that arrive in the colorful air mail envelopes. They are far away from home.

But soon the line is empty, and Mrs. Greene emerges to close the window from the outside, inserting a folded matchbook cover into the crack to keep the window from swinging open. She then returns to the office and latches the window from the inside.

But then another tenant, a bearded Sikh wearing a white turban with his business suit, rushes up and bangs on the window. "Singh, in 6C1. My post, Miss, please," he thunders. In a moment Mrs. Greene appears with a few letters for the man.

Again the light goes off and shortly she appears again, this time in her wool coat and with her bag in the crook of her arm.

"Good evening, Gideon. How are you?"

"Fine, thank you."

"Your mother says you are doing so very well in school. She's very proud of you."

"I'm doing OK," I say.

"Do you know Langley farmer? Such a nice boy."

"Sure, I do."

"Well, he won early acceptance to Brown University."

Mrs. Greene is a positive woman. She lives in the embrace of order, relating easily to success and shunning the other. This quality of fineness is there for everyone to

see, if they only look. But it isn't right that this fineness should be here on the premises of this building. It isn't right at all. She is a witness to chaos and failure it shouldn't be for her to see. She is a visitor from the other realm.

Mrs. Greene searches my face boldly through her pince-nez glasses. The process of reevaluation is underway. Somewhere within her she has to know. She has to. It isn't fair that she should pretend that she doesn't.

"Well, I will be going," she says.

I follow her path out of the lobby, noting the small steps she takes and how she pauses at the framed verse from the Book of Romans. I see through her eyes, not my own. And then I watch as she looks both ways before crossing the westbound street and enters the house of order.

Jerry is late, but then he is always late, as if it serves some purpose known only to him.

"Stay here," I say, as we stand outside the building.

"You got some kind of plan? You got something going on so we can meet these fine women?"

I pass through the street-level gate down the stairs to the yard. Through the screened window I see Momma and Auntie Eve standing at opposite ends of the mangle. They hold taut of the ends of a washed and dried sheet, which they feed into the canvas-covered rollers, the sheet working its way through the rollers before dropping, pressed, on a long board. They then take the ends of the pressed sheet and come together, matching the ends and then folding it once more. Then they pick up the next unironed sheet and feed that into the mangle. It will go on and on. Behind them is the big washing machine,

dirty linen sloshing around in its giant steel belly, the two drive wheels and the axle rotating in one direction for a few minutes, then reversing. And there is the racket of the giant extractor, as it wrings the water out of the laundry, and the blue-and-orange flame of gas from the drier. The whole kit and kaboodle is in operation.

The laundry room. It is where Momma and Auntie Eve most like to be. It calms them to make things white and like new again.

Back upstairs I send both elevators to the top floor. "I'm going in through the window. When I tap from the inside, let me know if the coast is clear to come out."

I flick the latch on the office window with a thin piece of cardboard and am quickly up and through. In the dark I crawl down onto the roll-top desk that dominates the tight space and strike a match to find the light switch. Opening the side drawer of the desk, I help myself to three twenties from a thick envelope by the gray money tray and then turn off the light. As I am about to tap on the window, I hear the elevator door open.

"Is that you, Jerry?"

"Hello, Mrs. Garatdjian."

"Are you waiting for Gideon? Is that why you are here?"

"Yes, I am, Mrs. Garatdjian. He just went upstairs for a minute."

"But it is late. It is a school night."

"We won't be gone very long. We are just going to see a friend down the block."

"Is it that strange man Sean?"

"No, not him, Mrs. Garatdjian. Not him."

"Tell me, Jerry. Do you attend church?"

"Oh, yes. Sometimes I go to the Presbyterian church on the next block."

"I see. But do they preach the true word of God? Do they tell you that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the light, that no man cometh to the Father except through Him?"

"Oh yes, they're very good. I wouldn't go to them if they weren't serious. Myself, I'm a serious person about religion."

"That is very good, Jerry. Very good."

Momma's mind is working. I can hear the permutations and see the shadow of her doubt about this church, and in the silence that descends between her and Jerry can feel her coming closer as I scrunch up far back in the kneehole of the desk. Now she is pulling open the sliding door. Momma is no one to fool with, not with her special powers. She knows the ways of the mind and the way into the mind. If her special powers are on, I must die on the spot, and she will die as well, her heaving heart bringing her to this fatal conclusion. She has seated herself; her rubber stockings and low-cut black shoes are only inches from my contorted, six-foot body. Any time now, she will say, in a quiet voice, "I know you're there, Gideon. You can't fool me." Oh Jesus, now the envelope stuffed with bills has fallen to the floor and I stifle the impulse to announce my presence before she actually spots me as her rough hand retrieves the envelope.

She has turned off the light and is closing the sliding door. But now the phone begins to ring and she sits back down. "Hello...Yes, good evening, Mr. Weill. How are you?...No, my sister is downstairs. Is there anything I can help you with?...I see...I will have her call you in the morning...Mr. Weill, if I could just say. My sister is not in good health...Yes, of course. Good night."

A hard rain has begun to fall; the cars along Broadway send up plumes of dirty water. We turn east on One Hundred Tenth Street past the gloomy mass of the Cathedral

of St. John the Divine and dangerous Morningside Park—lives lost to the knife, the bludgeoning bat, the berserk beat of fists on vulnerable flesh. That time in my other life when Luke and Jerry and I went to Harlem seeking fireworks and left pummeled, stripped of our bikes and our money by swarming Negro kids.

The rain batters the stuffed metal garbage cans lined up against the wall of the small building where we stop and collects on the dented covers and soaks the stuffed brown bags outside the cans. The rain is just falling in a cold, mean way. We climb, wet and dripping, to the top of the first flight of stairs. Jerry's knock brings a mustached man to the door. "What you want here?" he asks, in a heavily Spanish accent. His eyes show wariness, even dislike. I look back down the stairs to the broken pane of glass in the front door. The foul odor of dead rats comes from the walls.

"We came for women. We have money," Jerry says, and the man steps aside.

The living room serves as a waiting room. A red light burns in the ceiling fixture. The parquet floor is badly scuffed; the fireplace is in disuse. Across from us sits a thin man with a hacking cough.

Soon a dark-skinned man emerges from a long hallway and leaves the apartment. The man who met us at the door motions to the man with the cough to follow him down the hallway, then returns and motions to us as well. Our wet sneakers squeak as we follow after him. On either side of the hallway are rooms. In one, the door partially open, a naked and overweight woman sits on the edge of a bed stroking a Negro man's penis as if she is kneading dough.

The red light I was expecting is not burning. The room has a plain white ceiling bulb. In the middle of a queen-size bed lies a heavy, middle-aged woman with sagging

breasts and stretch marks. The faint mustache, the wrinkled skin, the huge triangular patch—it is too much.

"Here," she says, tossing me a rubber from the table. Her doughy, warty face breaks into a smile, revealing a gold front tooth.

I sit in a chair opposite the bed, holding the packet,

"You come here." To my ears it sounds like "Joo come here."

"Yes," I say, but don't get up.

"What is the matter? You no like your mama? Mama telling you to get out of those wet clothes."

I do as she says, then place the lubricated rubber on my limp penis and climb onto the bed. What if I can't do it? Will she be mad? With my eyes closed I sink into her, the horror giving way to a feeling of enormous pleasure.

Standing with my back to the woman, I use a tissue to remove the rubber.

"You a nice boy," she says.

The brown bags have come open in the downpour. Coffee grinds, grapefruit rinds, tin cans, banana peels, have tumbled out, the rain continuing to hit the refuse very hard.

"You have a call from that man Sean again. He is down in the lobby," Momma says.

That word "man" and that word "again," as if he has been calling every night.

But if not every night, Sean has come calling. He has a need for the bright lights and big events, for the world that Pastor Cohn denounced. Just some weeks ago he took me to see my first Broadway show, *Stop the World! I Want to Get Off*. Anthony Newley sang a big, passionate number called "For Once in My Lifetime," and it is still

reverberating, with all its pathos, in my consciousness. And then there were the flashing skates of Andy Bathgate at Madison Square Garden as the New York Rangers took on the Chicago Black Hawks with Bobby “The Golden Jet” Hull and Stan Mikita one night down at Madison Square Garden. I learned about slap shots and icing the puck and the blue line, and watched the zamboni smooth the ice between periods. And there was that big roll of bills Sean flashed, the way he always does, and his references to the big bet he had placed. “Five hundred dollars. I’m out five hundred dollars if these fuckers lose,” Sean said. And of course I had to be careful to hide what I saw, that all Sean’s money talk was an attempt to make himself a figure of power and importance.

But on this particular night we are not going to a movie or a show or Madison Square Garden. “You’re coming downtown with me. I want to rent me a room,” Sean says, in a deliberate war on grammar, bending the English language to his own needs the way he bends the world.

We hop a cab to Forty-ninth Street and Eighth Avenue, and stop in at the White Tower down the block from the Garden. “Give me three, and heavy on the onions,” he barks at the counterman moving the hamburgers around on the grill with his spatula, the world outside obscured by the fogged windows. The small space is crowded with men eating in their coats. Sean splatters the burgers with ketchup and washes them down with two big Cokes. “Gimme two more,” he barks, his mouth half-stuffed with the remnants of the last one.

As we head west, away from Broadway, the warm lights of clubs housed in the basements of small residential buildings beckon us down the stairs to a world of cool jazz and sultry singers, of elegant Negroes and beautiful women.

"This may be our place, baby," Sean says, stopping in front of a small building with a "Rooms Available" sign hanging above the entranceway. Inside, behind a Dutch door, the top half of which is open, sits a skinny older man with long, uneven sideburns and a giant Adam's apple bulging from his reedy neck in his untidy office.

"What can I do for you two?" he says, in a rough voice.

"I'm looking for a room. That's what you can do for me," Sean says, with equal roughness.

"And will you be the missus of the house?" the man asks, addressing himself to me. When I don't answer, the man turns to Sean. "What's it take to get her mouth open? Do I have to guess?"

Sean's gruffness gives way to hysterical laughter.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Desmond. But you can both call me Des, as in Des-ire," he says, in a sexy, suggestive voice. Standing now, he strikes an akimbo pose. He then leads us upstairs and through a dimly lit corridor into a room with a lumpy double bed and a dresser and a view, through the dirty window, of a brick wall.

"Would you like to stretch out, Sweetheart?" he says, patting the mattress.

Again Sean erupts in laughter.

"Are you looking at my pearly whites, dear? No need to worry. No lover has ever yet complained of my bite."

In fact, I have been staring not only at Desmond's rotting buck teeth but his purplish gums and slobber lips, wondering how it is that this extremely ugly man in oversize jeans can have the odd effect of making me feel desirable, as if I were a beautiful girl. My suspicion is that he is reckless but essentially harmless, simply

desperate for attention. Even so, a feeling of entrapment begins to grow standing under the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling and imagining the rootless occupants of such a seedy residence.

A loud popping sound comes from the courtyard. Desmond flings open the window, rattling the loose pane of glass. "Stop throwing that fucking garbage into the courtyard or I'm calling the police, you scumbags," he shouts to the air-mailer.

On the street, Sean says, "I'm moving up, baby. I got me a room. And I'll be talking to Frankie boy Sinatra soon about business."

"What kind of business?"

But the time for singing has come, Sean treating startled passersby to a few lines of "April in Paris." And now another statement. "A king. A fucking king, that's what I'm going to be." And that launches him on another song burst. "I've got the world on a string," he begins, as we approach the white lights of Broadway.

In the back seat of a cab heading uptown, he whispers, "Now it gets serious. I'm going to have a few parties. Invite some of the boys."

I think of some of the boys he might mean, like Jimmy Riley and Kevin and Rob Koley.

"Maybe some night I'll take Jane down here. I'll bet a stiff cock would split her wide open." He erupts now not in song but hateful laughter.

Sean's words reverberate, a feeling of painful excitement coming over me imagining Sean doing just that to Jane in that sleazy rooming house. Sean is just a little different, that is all. And it isn't lost on me that I am, too.

Sean wastes no time. He sends out word that there is to be a card party down at the room that Friday night. "Don't come unless you expect to lose some money," he warns everyone on the block.

"Is fatso Scully going to be there?" Jerry asks.

"He'll be there, I think," I say.

"Because that Scully, there's something mean and sick about him. Sounding on my moms like that. I don't need that kind of aggravation. I don't go talking about his Goodyear blimp moms, at least to his face. I don't go talking about his bulk."

Mrs. Greene steps from the building, smiles, and crosses the street.

"Are we going to visit that office again? How about tonight?" Jerry asks.

"No." Sneaking into the office isn't anything I want to do again. There was something reckless and dangerous about that incident, something crazy and corrupt. To betray my family like that? Was I insane?

"So when is the right night?"

"There is no right night. Never," I say. More than anything, I regret having involved Jerry. I am suddenly afraid of where it could lead.

"There's someone you've got to meet. His name is Lenny from Long Beach. This guy is fantastic. He can do anything."

"That's his name? Lenny from Long Beach?" Mark said.

"That's right. Lenny from Long Beach. Out on Long Island. He's my best friend. I'll come to this party on the condition I can bring Lenny with me."

"I don't see why not."

“You don't know how good this guy is. He can take a car engine apart and put it back together again practically blindfolded. Sometimes his old man treats Lenny with no respect or tenderness and kicks him out of the apartment, so he has to go and live with his moms out on Long Island. But for right now he and his old man are doing OK. I'm going to bring him down to Sean's room so you can see what quality is all about.”

"Hey, where do you think Sean gets the dinero to rent a room, anyway?" Luis wonders, as we exit the subway at Fiftieth Street and Seventh Avenue.

"Tips. He makes a lot in tips," Jimmy Riley says, cracking himself up with his own joke.

Along the way we pick up a big bag of hamburgers at the White Tower and ask a man heading into a nearby liquor store to get us a bottle of scotch. "Some nights we all need a little something, don't we, boys?" he says, and some minutes later is handing us a fifth.

Sean is dealing cards to Scully and Rob Koley when we arrive. "You guys in?" he asks, before we have gotten out of our coats.

Soon Jimmy is shouting, "Hit me again, motherfucker. I'm going to ruin your ass," and laughing his crazy laugh that tells you his whole plan is only to ruin himself.

"Oh, this sucks," Kevin says, getting his third bad hand in a row.

Kevin and Jimmy, in their own ways, can handle loss. It won't mean a whole lot to them. Luis is another matter. He has a competitive streak and too much pride to lose easily. I see tension in his handsome face. If he is a real sore loser, there could be a scene with Sean. I don't want anything to happen to Luis or to Sean either. I don't know what

to do. It feels like things are slipping out of control. Soon I will have to run away. We cannot have violence, as Momma says. We cannot.

When I get blackjack and win the bank, Sean buys it back from me for ten dollars. "I'm taking you all on," he says, and quickly snaps at Kevin and Jimmy for taking their time deciding whether they are good or taking another hit. His hair glistens from the gel he has applied and he must have taken a bath in cologne, so strong is the smell. And he is wearing dress slacks and leather shoes and a fancy black silk shirt. In manner and dress he is saying he is different.

The small room is hazy with cigarette smoke by the time Jerry arrives. His friend Lenny has laughing dark eyes and Elvis Presley hair and a roman nose and a tan, though summer is long gone. "This is Lenny from Long Beach," Jerry announces.

"Hey, man, and I'm Jimmy Riley from Manhattan," Jimmy replies, cracking himself up again.

Like Sean, Lenny is all in black—black, pointy shoes and black dress slacks and a black knit short-sleeved shirt buttoned at the top—the sort of outfit that would have made a skinny person look me look emaciated. But Lenny has the body goods to meet the challenge of filling any shirt or pair of pants well.

Like John the Baptist announcing the coming of the Lord has Jerry been beating the drum for Lenny not only to Mark but the whole neighborhood, telling one and all what a great lover and fighter his friend from Long Beach is, and how he can kick ass with one hand behind his back. As Lenny goes around the room shaking hands, I can only be afraid that Luis and Scully and the others will find him less than I want him to be

for them. And suppose he doesn't fit in? Lenny doesn't look like the kind of guy to be sitting on Scully's stoop. He looks too Italian or something.

"You want in?" Sean asks, in a not-so-friendly voice.

"Yeah. Deal me in," Lenny says, seating himself between Luis and Jimmy and placing on the table a pack of Luckies and a silver cigarette lighter. He is good with the smoke. He blows it out his mouth in a controlled stream and sucks it up his nose and can even send these delicate rings drifting around the room. He wins some hands and loses some hands, and Sean does not show him even the slightest amount of friendliness. It is just gruffness all the way, as if he is leaving the nice stuff to everyone else. If anything, Sean seems to grow worse. His manner gets snappier and more intense.

If I started strong, my luck has changed. Now I've lost four times in a row, and big pots of money—for me. Damn, I've been cleaned out. A malevolent smile replaces the hard expression on Sean's face. "What's the matter, Pussy? Things not going your way? Pussy going to start crying?" Like bullets he fires the words.

Sean is gloating because he has beaten me, and everyone in the room is now focused on my defeat. I grab a can of beer and drink it quickly, then fill a paper cup with scotch. It burns going down, but not even a second cup is enough to burn away the sense of humiliation. It is like Sean has his eye right in my mind and is laughing, laughing, laughing and I have nowhere to hide.

A key is inserted in the lock, the door opens, and Desmond crashes through. His face is unshaven and his what hair he has stands up wild and uncombed on his head. "Am I late for the party?"

Luis jumps up, his right hand in a fist and his arm cocked. "Who the fuck are you, Champ? I'm about to cave in your chest."

"What the hell's the matter with you, coming in here like this?" Sean has stood up from the table.

"Oh, honey, don't be talking to me in that rough way. Use your velvet tongue instead. It feels so much better," Desmond says, going falsetto. When Sean starts toward him, Desmond zooms out the door.

Jimmy rolls with laughter on the bed. "Who's that evil-looking man? Is that your boyfriend, Sean? Ahhahahahahahaha."

Desmond has been a welcome distraction, but I need something more to show that I have moved beyond the loss. Impulsively, I softly lob a piece of hamburger bun toward Jerry, seated across the room. But if I meant the toss as a friendly gesture, a way of connecting after feeling so alone, Sean does not see it that way. "Now I'm going to kick your ass," Sean says, pulling me from the chair and punching me to the floor. Dazed, all I can do is try to shield my face from Sean's blows.

"Hey Sean, Sean. What's the matter with you?"

Luis's voice sounds like it is coming from far away. He can't see. I don't want to see. It seems forever before Sean's heavy body is pulled off me and the punches stop.

"Maybe you live in a fucking pigsty, you stuck-up private school bastard, but you don't come around here and throw food in my place." Sean's voice is like a drill in my battered, aching head.

But then there is a gentler voice, again, as if from far away. It is Kevin. He is saying, "Man, he didn't do anything that bad."

"I want that prick out of here right now. Unless he really wants to get his ass kicked."

"Let's help him up," I hear Jimmy Riley say.

No, no, just let me stay here, he wanted to say. My eyes remain closed. There is safety in darkness. I can even pretend that nothing has happened. but I feel hands grab hold of his arms. "Which one is his coat? This one?" Such a soft, gentle voice Kevin has.

Soon I am standing. My eyes open to the harshness of the light and the reality of where I am. I see Jimmy placing my coat around my shoulders. I smile. I hope my smile speaks for me. I hope it tells them that what has happened has no meaning for me and is no big deal at all.

"Are you all right, man?" Jimmy asks, having followed me out into the hallway.

"I'm fine. Really," I hear myself say.

"Look. Maybe you want someone to go home with you," Kevin suggests. It isn't good, all this concern. They could get angry at all this attention they have to pay me. I just need to get away so I can be alone.

"Here, take this token at least," Jimmy says, and drops it in the pocket of my parka.

On the subway, people stare at me. One lady asks if I am all right. I try to keep the same smile on my face as proof that no damage has been done, as if Sean is there among the other passengers in the car gloating over his victory. I must not feed that gloat with any look of hurt. I remember how Hannah would look the same as Sean as she was beating Luke and me when we were small. But my smile isn't working all that well. All I

can think is that I have been steamrolled by Sean, starting with the San Francisco Giants overtaking the Los Angeles Dodgers, and then Sean beating me at cards and after that beating me physically. I tell myself that I am never going to be around Sean again, that I just won't, even as a voice whispers that I am silly to think I have the power to stay away.

“What on earth?” Momma says. “Who did this to you? Who?”

“No one did anything to me,” I say.

“Do not give me your lies and evasions. Tell me now. Have you been with that man? Has that man done this to you?”

“What man? I haven't been with any man.”

“Your eye is blackened.”

“I had an accident. That is all.”

“That man is your accident,” Momma says.

For a while Tom Smits and I had the university gym to ourselves, but now other kids have entered. I vaguely recognize them from up around One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street, where Luke and I would go some years before. Tough kids. And there are some girls with them, skinny girls twelve or thirteen, and some of the boys and some of the girls go under the stands so they can be alone together and have a private place for what they need to do. Tito Esplanar and Soto Faquindo and Mariano Gutierrez and Hector Ramirez and Bosco Vaccaro and Serge Melendez and Melinda Diaz and Aguilera Nono and Ramon Garcia and his girlfriend Ramona Vasquez are there. A white boy is among them. He

can't be more than five feet four inches, but he is built and can get off the floor and stay in the air and has acrobatic moves. For years now I have seen him from afar—on the street, in playgrounds—and I even know his name, Marty Branigan, though I can't say how, and that he has an older brother, Terry Branigan, who is not short at all, and with take-out power in both fists. Because even in New York City, people have faces you sometimes remember without having spoken to them, as if there is a part of you in which they are meant to live, though for what purpose you can't say. And with that comes the sweet ache, as I felt when he saw Patty Joyce and Chao speed from the liquor store with the bottle they had boosted. It is just an ache for something I don't know but could have known, only it isn't that either, because I have known them, I have, only it wasn't here, it was at the Bible camp, a time that is sealed away only it isn't, it lives in me somewhere. What it means is that things come together in my mind that I can't keep apart and that reduce me to a feeling.

And it is for these kids to fight with fists and then with bats and then with chains and knives and zip guns because no communication other than that is needed when it is clear that other groups of kids have done them wrong with displays of spoken or unspoken attitude requiring them to show that they aren't playing, man, they just aren't playing. And Marty Branigan is there with them in the Columbia gym on that day, flying through space and curling toward the basket that he would not be denied. Because Marty Branigan is where his life is and not apart from it.

Now a man-child comes into our midst on that winter day with the stone ditty bop walk of his own stylized truculence, drawing attention by the slow measure of his step, his oppressive and dread-inspiring energy sufficient to silence the raucous sound of the

One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street boys and girls. "Poppy's here," one of them whispers. "Poppy's here." But Poppy pays them no mind. He walks out on the court from under the basket and crosses the half-court line and says to Tom, as if I am not even present, "Listen up, Bones. I gotta get me some of this. I want you to play me. I want you to beat me. Because if you don't beat me, then I gotta beat you." Poppy wears khaki pants and low-cut black sneakers. He wears a white T-shirt that was made for a soaking in blood. He has close-cut black hair. He has a face that doesn't smile. He walks alone and has the stance that he wants, at a right angle to all society.

It is neighborhood news that a cold rain has poured down on Poppy's life. He has hurt some people with knives. He has stabbed them in the chest and in the back for not having enough money when he held them up or for giving him a wrong look. He has been away to homes and reform schools, but he always comes back. He does not carry books or keep normal hours.

I am afraid for Tom, afraid that he is not understanding the mean power of Poppy and might react with anger if Poppy elbows him in the face or gives him a forearm whack underneath the basket, or just gives him his clobber fist because Tom isn't wearing the right expression.

Poppy reaches into his back pocket and takes out his blade. It is a blue-handled stiletto, the kind you see displayed with the blade open in Times Square shop windows. He places it tenderly on the side of the court. "I want to play light. I don't want nothing holding me back," Poppy says. Seeing my fearful focus on the knife, he says, "Listen up, Bones. I don't want for you to be looking at my thing or touching it. Don't makes me repeat myself."

Tom looks at me, as if to say, "Where am I?" but when the game begins he does not hold back. He does his back-into-the-basket move and fake-one-way, then wheel-for-a-hook shot move. He hoists his I-can't-get-off-the-ground jump shot and flops about the court while Poppy plays with a sullen dignity, as if performing some intricate dance step. Poppy lets loose with left-handed jump shots. He shoots them on a low, flat trajectory from his ear from all over the court. Some bang hard off the rim and some are all net. Sometimes he comes in low and goes upstairs, dunking the ball with one hand and sometimes with two hands.

When Tom misses a hook shot and Poppy puts in the rebound from under the basket, Tom protests that Poppy should have taken it back behind the foul line before shooting. Poppy just fixes him with a baleful stare, burning him with his hard black eyes.. He finally says, "I gots mines. You gots to get your owns." Then he throws in a corner jump shot and does some crazy, involved victory dance step.

"Game's over, boys and girls." A guard stands at the main entrance and taps his nightstick on the stairs leading down to the court. It is Louie. Tom and I grab our coats and the ball and began to flee, as do the La Salle Street boys and girls, but Poppy pockets his blade and heads slowly toward the guard and the power of his nightstick and his uniform, as if paying little mind to the guard and his badge and all he represents. Louie is not anymore banging with his nightstick. He is not saying "Boys and girls." He is not saying anything. He is just watching Poppy, the way the world is compelled to watch Poppy, as Poppy steps past him into what remains of the winter light.

The school bus driver is a worn old man with a stubbly face and a sunken chest. An SRO type of man, I think, watching from my window seat behind him as my classmates begin to fill the bus. Will Freddy Snyder hurt the driver's feelings with some insensitive remark? But no, the driver is invisible to Freddy and Lance and all of them. There is a whole world they do not see, and why should they, as it is not theirs?

Soon the driver pulled the halves of the doors together and circles around to Amsterdam Avenue. As it head north toward Morningside Heights, I find myself urging the driver to hit all the lights and speed past Scully's stoop. But when he doesn't, braking instead to a halt at One Hundred Fourteenth Street because of his slowpoke pace, time seems to stop. The whole gang is out in force. In terror I stare at Fatso Scully in his red and white LaSalle cardigan, and Luis and Kevin and Jimmy and Philip, the kid with the sharp mouth. And there goes Scully's tall, haggard-looking father, clinging the tenement steps with his big bag of beer. And now Sean emerges from the grocery store carrying a box of empty bottles down to the basement.

What a small life it suddenly seems, kids with nothing better to do than hang around the stoop of rundown building swigging from bottles of soda, smoking cigarettes, and making small puddles of spit.

And there is Jane turning the corner toward Scully and the rest of them, and even from her, for a moment, I can feel some distance.

The gym is down a set of stone steps, in the basement of the Riverside Church. From the end of a long corridor, beyond the locker room where we change into our shorts, comes the booming sound of a basketball being dribbled on the hardwood floor. It was a sound that calls us to it with the promise of losing ourselves in play. And there

are the sounds we can't hear until we are closer, the squeaking of sneakers as someone cuts for the basket and the slapping sound of a hand on flesh when a foul is committed.

The basement also features a bowling alley and a large room where the Friday night social group, of which Jane is a part, hold dances. That feeling of distance when I saw her bothers me. Well, I will be with her later. That is the important thing, to make sure I see her every day so she won't forget who I am and I won't forget who she is. In this way can I keep our love alive.

Red gym shorts and a T-shirt. Sweat socks and white high-top Keds. The missing item is a jockstrap. I know the pain of being hit down there, and yet those protectors embarrass me.

I say a silent prayer that all the compartments of my life remain intact: that Scully and the others stay on the stoop, that Jane not come wandering by the gym for some reason, that his family not be in the general vicinity. If I imagine the worst, then it has less chance of coming true.

Mr. Sadowski puts us through a half-hour of exercises—jumping jacks and wind sprints and sit-ups and pushups—before we can put a ball on the floor and practice formations like the box and one and double weave.

The male enrollment of the high school is small. It would be hard to suit up ten boys who could control their dribble while running up and down the court. Tom, from the ninth grade, my classmate Freddy Snyder, and I were the only three non-Juniors or Seniors to try out for the varsity.

It is never good when I am assigned to the skins and not the shirts. All I see are tanned, well-proportioned bodies. How well they stand up under the bright and pitilessly

revealing gym lights. Even Mr. Arbuckle, who often joins us for these scrimmages, looks great in his tennis whites and sweat bands. Once again that shame.

“Gideon, get your hands up on defense,” Mr. Sadowski barks. Does he not know that to lift my arms is to give fuller exposure to my ribs?

Mr. Arbuckle has only one real move, which is to step toward the basket and pull back for a two-handed set shot. It is an easy shot to time and block, and stealing the ball off his dribble is not hard either.

“You’ll be starting for this team next year,” Mr. Sadowski says, at the end of the scrimmage, placing his hand on my back. Suddenly, my future is all there in front of me again—Ivy League gyms, cheerleaders. It is a moment of intimacy I have to escape from.

“Wait for me,” Tom Smits says, his hair wet and plastered to his scalp after a shower. I steer clear of the hissing water. I have had enough nudity for the day, partial or otherwise.

Buoyed by the scrimmage, I take the chance that Tom can come near yet remain far. We pass the unused tennis court on the campus of Barnard College. Behind them is ivy-covered Millbrook Hall and ahead a deep hole in the ground where the new library is to stand. And then there is the big wrought-iron gate at One Hundred Seventeenth Street leading onto Broadway and the achingly beautiful forest green wood fence that serves as a barrier between the campus and the street on the other side.

“We’ll be dominating the varsity next year,” Tom Smits says.

“You think?”

“Yeah, but you are a bag of bones.”

“Shut up.”

“Doesn’t anybody feed you?”

“Stop.”

“Hey, I’m sorry. I was only joking.”

All along I had thought I would find a way to leave Tom Smits before we came to my building, but one block after another passes and now the block where I live is looming, as if I am on a bike heading straight for a wall and I can’t turn the wheel. But no collision results. There is no Harry Frug to call out to me from the radio and TV store and no Mr. Berger to call out from the hosiery shop, both having locked up for the night, and my older sisters Hannah and Naomi do not call out to me and Luke does not call out to me nor do my father and Momma and Auntie Eve call out to me, and Jerry Jones-Nobleonian is not on the corner to call out to me. Nor do any of the gang from Scully’s stoop call out to me. There is no calling out of any kind, so I can be of myself and myself alone in the presence of Tom Smits. And now we have come to the safe region of One Hundred Tenth Street, three blocks past the street where my building rises like a soreness to the eye.

“I’ll see you,” I say, asking only that no further smart thing fly from Tom Smits’s mouth.

But Tom Smits has the smart thing ready anyway. "Where did you say you live?" There is a grin on his face.

"Around here," I say.

"Around here." He laughs and shakes his head, as if in wonder at the amusement I provide for him.

And now, from the fruit and vegetable store who comes but Momma, carrying a small bag of groceries, and our eyes lock before I can pretend not to see her. With her free hand does she give a small wave and so I have no choice but to do the same. And if I am hoping that Tom has not seen this mutual display of recognition, it is a foolish hope, for Tom has been waiting to see, he has had a need to see. And so even though Momma goes on her way, warned off by whatever it is that I am transmitting, Tom can pounce, bringing his voice to a new level of sarcasm. "Who is that old woman with the funny shoes? Is that your mother?"

"What woman?" I say.

"That old woman wearing the man's shoes and rubber stockings?" Tom says.

"I don't..."

"You don't what?"

"I don't..." I will not be Judas Iscariot. I will not be made to lie down in death for such a crime. But I will not affirm her either. I will not do anything but what I can do, dodging the vicious cars and buses and trucks that think they own Broadway as I weave across the street to the Whelan's Pharmacy, where I spin the rack containing the paperback novels, seeing without seeing for a few minutes, until I can be reasonably sure the coast is clear and it is safe to head home without the bloodhound Tom Smits behind me.

Sean has been living in my mind. He has used brute force to pound himself even more into my consciousness. Sean is a hard-knuckled fist. Sean is the wild animal you think you can tame even after it has bitten you half to death. There is a residue of satisfaction

beyond the humiliation in knowing that you have engaged with Sean's power and survived. To be beaten by Sean is to enter into a finer intimacy, for his body has been on yours.

Scully's stoop is calling to me. I hear it calling. Do not tell me of the distance I felt when seeing it from the school bus. My love is there, on that strip of Amsterdam Avenue, from the pharmacy on one corner to the florist's shop on the other. It is where I must go to feel good, even when it makes me feel bad, because I am missing my life if I am not there. Someone has to see me. Someone. Besides, if I do stay away, Sean might think I am ashamed to show my face.

"What do you do in that room, anyway?" Jane Thayer says.

"Sean likes to play cards." The room is something for her to know about but to be kept apart from at the same time.

"You shouldn't have to get a black eye from playing cards."

"That's the way he plays cards. From blackjack to a black eye."

"He's dangerous. Don't you know that?"

"You're dangerous," I say.

"You wouldn't mind if I borrowed Jane for a night, would you, Gideon? I'm having a party with a few friends. How about it? I know she likes me. You can always tell these things." Philip Malloy takes a few practice swings with the thick, store-bought softball bat. He has seen the same thing that Scully and all of them have seen. He has seen that I am not tough.

"I don't know about that," I say.

“What do you mean you don’t know about that? I want to go out with your girlfriend. What’s wrong with that? Don’t you want to share her?” There is only numbness and fear where anger should be and the sense that Philip has the force of inevitability and can sweep me out of the way like a fallen leaf.

“Damn, Philip, leave him alone. Show some respect,” Jimmy Riley say.

“Respect my dick,” Philip replies, grabbing his crotch before speeding away to catch a bus.

"Damn. I would have caved in his chest, he talked that way to me," Luis says. Cave in his chest? Put a hole in his chest? What is this language of grotesque violence that it should be part of everyday speech?

In the winter darkness the lights from the university buildings give a warm glow. Snow is everywhere, crowning the tops of the hedges lining the campus walkways and blanketing the south lawn and muffling all noise but the crunching sound our shoes make on the snow underfoot.

"Tell me how you’re interested in them. Tell me." Because he could not name his nemesis and make him any more real than he already was. She would know, and even if she didn’t, it was only matter of time before she did.

Jane jerks quickly to attention. She has heard me speak in this voice before. "Cut it out, Gideon. Cut it out."

"Who is it, Jane? I won't breathe a word." Because once the soreness starts, it has to run its course.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she says, continuing with her raised voice, letting me know that she is leaning toward the histrionic for the sole purpose of attracting attention and showing me up. With my open right hand, I slap her face.

"You bastard," she says, holding her cheek. Her eyes are flashing fire as she takes off.

Two students walking together and speaking softly pass by. They don't spit at me. Other students follow. They don't spit at me either or wag their fingers and say, "We don't do that here. We just don't do that here." Nor does the campus does rain down its mocking laughter upon me. It just leaves me to prepare for the punishment that is required for crossing a forbidden line and striking a girl, the snow falling and falling to the earth so eager to soil it.

"Oh, hello, young Romeo. No, I don't think she is in....No, I'm not really sure when she will be back....Yes, of course I'll give her your message. Trust me to do just that." It is that same velvety smoothness I always hears in the voice of Mrs. Thayer.

A half hour later I return to the luncheonette and head for the phone booth. A man answers. "She's not able to come to the phone, Sport. Another day, Sport." Sport. The word is like a hard jab in my chest. He knows. Jane has told him. That explains his curt, unfriendly tone. He is banishing me forever.

As the minutes pass it comes to me to see Mr. Thayer's words in a different light. He hasn't forbidden me to call. He just said Jane wasn't able to come to the phone. And yet the thought of hearing one more "Sport" from her stern-voiced father is terrifying. But maybe Jane will pick up the phone herself.

The third time is not a charm. "Lights out, Sport. Lights out." Mr. Thayer slams down the phone.

As I lie in bed, I think of Tom Smits. He wouldn't get mixed up with a girl and spend his days with nothing else on his mind. He is too intelligent. All the Claremont kids are. They go on dates and to their stupid parties. They wouldn't be slapping some girl on a weekday school night.

Luke is still out. I remember how it used to be, thinking I would never get into the same kind of trouble my brother was having with Nancy Becker.

Unable to sleep, I leave my room. When I turn on the kitchen light, a thousand roaches scurry. The refrigerator offers the only safe haven. On one of the cluttered shelves rests a damp and wrinkled brown bag containing bleu cheese, camembert, gouda — a whole bunch of cheeses for my father only.

Away from the dining room table, on a shelf, rests a framed photo of Momma and my father sitting on a grassy knoll. My father is in a suit and tie, his jacket draped over his bent knees. Momma wears a dark dress with many buttons up the front. She has a shy smile for the camera. My father's smile is one of a man who has everything. They are so much younger than they are now, and though I have never asked, I for some reason assume they have just been married.

But it is not food or images from the past but my life that draws me from my bed to wander to my inevitable destination, the phone before me on the crowded table in the living room. As if I have no choice, I lift the phone from its cradle, and begin to spin the rotary dial.

"Is someone there?" Momma calls from the dining room and now is here before me in her white terrycloth robe.

"What is it, my son, that you are still up?"

"Nothing's the matter," I say.

"Is it your girlfriend? You can tell me. I won't breathe a word."

"No," I say.

"Are you sure it is not Jane?"

"Maybe."

"Is she being mean to you?"

"Stop," I say.

"I will give you something so your night will not be sleepless."

Momma goes off to her closet in the hallway, the one she keeps locked. In the palm of her rough hand rests a slender yellow capsule. "Here. Take this with a glass of water. Lie still in bed so it can take effect."

We are at the dining room table now. I start to get up but she stops me. "Do not be led astray. Do you know what I mean by 'astray'?"

"Not now, Momma. Not now." I am too afraid, too anxious, in too much pain to be angry.

In minutes a feeling of bliss surges through me. I will call Jane tomorrow and we will be back together. At school I will talk easily with Diane Coleman and Bert Bach and John Edel. I can even imagine asking Robin Abel to go out on a date with me. There will be no terror, no lack of confidence, no sense of separation from anyone.

The next morning Momma shakes me awake to pain as raw as the day before. I bolt from the apartment down to the luncheonette and into a phone booth. I don't care about Mr. Thayer and his "Sport" stuff or Mrs. Thayer and her velvet voice. I must speak with Jane. I must speak with my life. And here she is on the line, and here I am with words of apology just pouring out of me.

"Oh, that's okay. I understand."

She understands? Then why does she sound remote and cool?

"Can I see you later?"

"I don't think so."

"Why?"

"Why? Because I have other plans."

And now the phone has gone dead.

"So, Gideon, what happened to the Dodgers?" The baseball season was over a hundred years ago, but football and basketball mean little to Lev. Smoke from his Camel pours from his big mouth. He is the most Jewish-looking man I have ever seen, with his blubbery lips and a hooked nose even larger than my father's. What startles is that his wife is as beautiful as Lev is ugly. Some afternoons she comes in and helps out behind the lunch counter. You can get dizzy with lust looking at her curvy figure in the white smock she wears over her dress.

"Koufax," I mumble. Koufax and his injured finger.

It is always the same thing with the store owners, even Lev. They talk to me and are nice to me and then I remember that store rents they are supposed to give to Auntie Eve are going to Simon Weill.

I head back to the phone booth. Maybe Jane didn't hang up. Maybe we were just disconnected.

"Sport, Sport. Good morning, Sport. She's gone off to school. You do the same now."

I drop the receiver as if I had received an electric shock.

In English class I stare from the back row at Robin Abel's thin neck and her beautifully sculpted round head and her shiny black short hair, and wonder, with horror, how I could have imagined even saying hello to her let alone asking her out on a date. If, in the dark, the pill expanded my horizons, in the daylight I have contracted back into my normal frightened self.

"Did I tell you? I'm going out with Jill this Saturday," Lance says to Freddy Snyder in the hallway afterward.

"Maybe we could double-date. I have a date with Sharon," Freddy Snyder says.

Jill. Sharon. *Date*. Such an unbelievably cold word. A word that means you see someone once and then not again. A word that means unbearable change. The pain. I don't know what to do. Never again must I have such straying thoughts. Never again. Always and forever must I recommit myself to Jane and the endless security she represents.

"Get your damn hand off my leg, you faggot," Scully says, in a carrying voice in the darkened theater.

"Ain't nobody wants to touch your ugly leg, my man," Jimmy says, in an equally carrying voice, as the coming attractions play on the movie screen.

On the refreshments line, an idea comes to me. I don't have to keep calling Jane.

Jerry can do it for me. "All you have to say is that I was hit by a car."

"Could you lend me some money to get a box of popcorn and a soda?" Jerry says.

"But will you do it?"

"I need me a Snickers bar too."

"Will you do it?" I ask, forking over the money.

"Oh man, she ain't going to go for that," Jerry says, the Snickers bar sticking out of his shirt pocket as we head for the phone booth.

"Is this Jane? A friend of hers. My name is Jerry Jones-Nobleonian... Yes, it is a very distinguished name." Jerry cups the receiver. "Her moms is going to get her," he whispers. "Hello, Jane? This is Jerry. I just wanted to tell you some bad news. Gideon got runned over by a truck and he's in bad shape at St. Luke's Hospital...No, I swear it's the truth. Really. It's no lie. He got runned over real bad."

Jerry put the phone back on the hook. "She hung up, man. She says it's all a bunch of your horseshit and that you put me up to it. It don't sound too good for you, man. You know, I could do with one of those hot dogs."

The wall clock in the theater glows in the dark. Within ten minutes I am back at the same phone booth. This time I am alone.

"Well, what do you want? Are you going to live or die? Tell me the hospital where you are staying and your room number so I can send flowers," Jane says.

"I miss you," I say.

"Poor baby." She laughs and hangs up.

The facial contortions of Jack Lemmon. And how pixieish Shirley Maclaine sparkles. But that laugh of Jane's means more than anything on the screen. The phone booth draws me from my seat once again. Maybe she was giving me a signal that she was really happy to have heard from me.

"Fuck off, creep," she says. This time there is no laughter at all in her voice.

Another week goes by. I haven't died. I haven't died at all. And the phone booth is not calling to me the way it did. And I am living somewhat beyond the sadness of the crime I have committed.

League play has begun. Mr. Sadowski calls me from the bench toward the end of the second and third quarters. The red and white uniform, the organized competition, the refs, the small crowds—it's all a thrill. But the quarters go by so fast. What is that, eight minutes? I want to play all afternoon and into the evening.

"Gunner Garatdjian, the crazy Armenian," Tom says, laughing, after the first game. I have scored on drives and shots from the corner, compensating for a lack of jumping ability with quickness and agility. Never mind that we lost. My performance, and the pat on the back from Mr. Sadowski, are sufficient cause for intoxication.

Listening to Murray the K's swinging soiree on WABC that evening, I imagine love and admiration pouring down on me from the stands as I do things that have never been done before on a basketball court.

But then there is the next practice session, where once again I am grounded in reality when I collide with a chubby senior under the boards, my bony hip making a

hollow sound as it knocks against a senior's elbow. The action stops as the boy gives me a look that says, "You and I both know you have a body to be ashamed of," a look I deeply receive.

The big marquee jutting out onto Eighth Avenue, the Nedicks and its hot dogs on toasted buns, the smoke-filled grandstand and those steep steps, the roaring crowds, the vendors hawking food and drinks, the darkened arena and the lights trained on the hardwood floor—Tommy "Ack-Ack" Heinsoh slinging jump shots with contemptuous confidence and Bob Cousy, his rooster head always up as he dribbles, and Bill Russell, at center, intimidating Bob Pettit, a high-scoring forward with a twenty-foot jump shot, and the other St. Louis Hawks—I love these nights at Madison Square Garden.

But I don't love Tom Smits, not when he says, "You're bright. You should go to a school like Brown or Penn," as we stare down at the court. Does Tom Smits not know what Mr. Arbuckle had to say about the SAT? Does Tom Smits not know what is inside me? I feel him moving closer now, awaiting the opportunity to put the laughing thing on my mind as he has about where I live and Momma.

Then there is the night that Loyola Chicago takes the court with four Negro starters. They have Les Hunter at center and Vic Rouse at forward. They have deadly Ron Miller and racehorse Jerry Harkness as starting guards. Loyola Chicago runs right over its slow and clumsy white opponent, as Tom bet me they would, once again showing no fear about Negro advancement. Tom Smits does not know what unappeasable Negro anger is, how they punch and punch and when you fall down they punch some more. He doesn't know what it is to have to hold something back because your life depends on it. Tom Smits laughs as Loyola Chicago humiliates the white boys. He just laughs and laughs,

leaving me no choice but to punch him in the face. Tom Smits has beaten me, and now I have to beat him. I run from the Garden and all I have done, but before I am home, the rage has given way to shame. I had wanted Tom Smits to know only my smiling and amiable ways. I had not wanted Tom Smits to see this thing in me that he has now seen.

Vera does not deny Momma and she does not deny her life. How such a thing can be I cannot say. I just know that it *is*. Here she is now as I enter the front door, sharing what passes for our sofa with a girl whose long, silky blond hair has captured the light of the sun.

“Hi, Gideon” Vera says, in the teasing way that she can sound when with a girlfriend. “You remember Pam, don’t you?”

As the girl stares at me, I hear her unspoken scorn for the way we live. It is all I hear.

“We’re going over to the College Inn. Want to come?” Vera says.

“OK. Sure,” I say, before I can say no.

The crew have drifted down from Amsterdam Avenue to hang around outside the College Inn. “Hey, look at the broads Mark’s with,” Scully says, loud enough for me and Vera and Pam to hear.

“Hey, my man, why don’t you introduce us to these fine-looking women?” Jimmy calls, as we enter the coffee shop.

“That’s my brother’s gang. My brother is a hoodlum,” Vera says, as we take a booth.

“A gang sounds very romantic. Is your gang anything like those in *West Side Story*? My parents took Nancy and me to see the play,” Pam says.

West Side Story. Her question paralyzes me. It feels like a test. "No," I say, not wanting her to know I have never heard of the play. "And my sister is just kidding. That's not a gang. They're just some kids I know."

"No, I'm not kidding. He's unbelievable. You don't know some of the characters he hangs around with. There's this one guy who looks like he's thirty-five. I call him Watermelon Head because his head is that big."

"He doesn't look thirty-five," I say, though I can't say exactly say how old Sean looks. But my sister can't stop.

"You know what he did to get thrown out of St. Andrews? He threw toilet paper at the nuns. And at camp a few years ago he got caught with a pack of cigarettes the first week. You should have seen him. He was always crying to come home."

"Were you always crying?" Pam Becker says, putting her big blue eyes on me.

"No. Not always," I say.

"He bawled like a baby. No one knew what to do with him."

"Were you unhappy there?" Pam asks me.

"He missed our mother. He's a little mama's boy, though he tries to hide it."

"Are you close to your mother?" Pam asks.

"I guess," I say.

"He's got this other friend. I see them together sometimes. He's tall and real cute. I keep asking Gideon to introduce me, but he never does," Vera says to Pam. She's talking about Tom Smits.

"Why don't you introduce her?" Pam asks.

"I don't know." But I do know. My shame extends to her and the whole family. I'm not good enough for Tom, and neither is she.

"Look. Isn't that your girlfriend?" Vera says.

Across from Jane, several booths down, sits Philip, the kid with the smart mouth.

"She's pretty," Pam says.

"Aren't you going to go over and say hello?" Vera asks.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," I say.

"You broke up?" Vera goes on.

"I guess."

"What did you do to her?"

"I don't know. Nothing. Something." I look at Pam but then turn away. Though her gaze is soft, I am afraid she is seeing what my sister sees.

As we leave, I manage not to turn toward Jane and Philip.

"It was so great meeting you," Pam Becker says, outside the coffee shop. I have no reason to believe she means it.

Back in my room I stare through the screened window across Broadway, the coffee shop in full view through the bare trees on the island in the middle of the street. Though it is a half hour before Jane and Philip emerge, I maintain my vigil, following their path as they head north up Broadway. Then I lie on Luke's bottom bunk curled up in the fetal position and moan softly. I want the pain to stop. But the pain won't stop. It is this screaming thing inside of me with a life of its own.

"Are you having trouble sleeping again? Is that it? Of course you can have a pill. You just wait here," Momma says, when night comes.

I had been doing so well before seeing Jane. And now, with the pill in me, I begin to do well all over again. The pill just melts all the pain away, and makes me hope the morning is a long time coming.

Down Broadway do the orange snowplows come, heralding their arrival with the click-click of chains on the huge tires. The snow that falls and falls must not be allowed to bring the city to a standstill. Cars and trucks and buses were not made to stand still but to come and go and come and go along the boulevard below my window.

Two kids stand at the top of a snowdrift and let fly with hard-packed snowballs at a passing bus. A woman jumped back in her seat, startled, as the snowballs slammed against the window of the southbound bus. The boys raise their arms in triumph, as I would have some years before.

The College Inn, across the street, is calling to me, and so I go.

"My younger son came down from Ithaca to see me. He's doing swell. Did I tell you? He's a straight A student at Cornell, and he's majoring in chemistry. It's simple. He's just got the right stuff. I don't know where he got it—not from me—but he's got it. He took the test for the Bronx High School of Science and got in. He got a perfect score on the math part of, what do you call that test?" Ralph, the counterman, flops the wet rag over and leisurely wipes around the cake stand and the condiments.

"The SAT?" I say.

"That's it. The SAT. And now he's on a full scholarship at one of the best colleges in the country. The other one, he's a shmegegge, if you ask me, driving a cab and with no thought of the future. You look like a smart boy. You think you'll get a perfect score on that test?"

"I wish." I can see from the way Ralph grins that he doesn't think so either. Ralph has a sad, slow way about him and bags under his eyes, like I used to have when I was a kid.

"Now my younger boy is spending time with his mother during his college break. She lives on Mosholu Avenue. You know where Mosholu Avenue is?"

"No," I say.

"The Bronx Zoo is nearby. You've never been to the Bronx Zoo?"

"No."

"My younger boy used to live there. He knew all the animals. You know what a dromedary is?"

"A dromedary?"

"How are we going to get you into college if you don't know what a dromedary is? It's a kind of camel."

"Oh, that's right," I say, my ears turning red.

"How come I don't see you with that girl anymore, the pretty one?"

"I don't know."

"So what do you know?" Ralph doesn't wait for an answer but goes off down the counter with his rag, where a customer is waiting.

"Gideon?"

I turn on my stool to face a girl with striking red hair. "My name is Frieda. I'm a friend of Jane's. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure." The thought that Jane has told her about the slap makes me uneasy, as does the pretty figure she reveals when she takes off her coat.

"Jane wanted me to tell you that she loves you and really wants to see you again."

Her voice is solemn, embarrassingly so. I want to tell her that such words go against her grain. What I really want to tell her is that I am not worthy of such an avowal of love, even from a messenger, even as it elates and even intoxicates me.

"Thank you," I say, and as quickly as that, she buttons her coat and leaves.

"Are you kidding? Him? Philip? I saw him that one time," Jane says.

I walk her home from her grandmother's along the same route through Columbia where the slap occurred.

"Who was that girl I saw you with at the College Inn?" she says.

"You mean my sister Vera?"

"The girl with the blond girl."

"Oh, her. She's just Vera's friend."

"What's her name?"

"Pam."

My reconnection with Jane is more than enough to keep me from feeling the winter cold. Amazing. Just when I am getting to be okay about not being with her anymore, she is back in my life.

Auntie Eve has placed wreaths with red ribbons and boughs of holly in the lobby, and even a small tree with lights, but someone swipes the tree and the stand as well, leaving only the bed of snow, and so Auntie Eve has to get a second tree, and all that goes with it.

We have our own tree in the apartment, a Douglas fir, decorated with ornaments and electric lights and a star. Underneath the tree are presents, lumpy and hastily wrapped: socks, a shirt, a tie for my father, a scarf for Momma.

Momma cooks a turkey, as she did for Thanksgiving, and the apartment fills with its strong, delicious smell. There are sweet potatoes and gravy and stuffing to go with the turkey, and the dinner would not be complete without tart, tart Ocean Spray cranberries and gallons of apple cider and soft, sweet pumpkin pie.

My father says grace. “Dear Lord, we thank you for our many blessings, for this food on the table that my beloved wife has prepared, and for all the good she brings into our lives....” It goes downhill from there. He gets emotional and starts to weep as he struggles to thank the Lord for having led him to Momma, as he doesn’t know where he would be without her.

“Hayk, we must finish. The food will get cold,” Momma whispers.

“Praise Jesus. Thank you, Jesus,” my father says several times, like an engine shuddering toward stillness after the ignition has been turned off, as he slowly lowers himself into his chair at the head of the table.

Auntie Eve does not join us. She has her island of aloneness on which she stands, and for some reason I see her by herself on a dark and cold Stockholm Street under glittering stars. It is how I want to see her, as it gives me hope to picture her like that.

And my sister Rachel is not there either, but her absence is different from Auntie Eve’s. It is as if Rachel is howling her loneliness from some crummy room in a hotel for transients that she occupies.

Afterward Momma says, “It has been the life’s work of Naomi to drive your sister Rachel down from the heights she aspired to and reached. You must know that there is malicious intent in this world and it comes often in the form of these pills the psychiatrists, such as the ones Naomi has been in the care of, dispense. Naomi gave your sister Rachel these feel-good pills and then led her to the bottle. The world has now claimed your sister Rachel, as a wolf snares the lamb, and is doing terrible things to her, but the Lord has vanquishing power over Satan’s domain and we will all be in heaven together, my son. All of us. Of this you can be sure. Because the Rapture can be delayed, if we are to be a slave to time, but never cancelled. Tell me you understand these words I speak. Tell me,” Momma says.

“I understand,” I say, the turkey having made me drowsy and ready only for sleep.

The school is not content with the West Side and the brownstones that house it and the beautiful yard where, in warm weather, we play dodge ball and read on benches under the tall, thick beech trees. During the holiday season there is a relocation. No more ivy-colored walls. No more two-stop subway rides on the IRT West Side local. No more unfriendly public school eyes upon us as we emerge from our school for the privileged wearing our preppie uniforms. The school now has a more prestigious address on the East Side, where sleek, chauffeur-driven cars will not be in conflict with the tenement surroundings.

Human Day has been eliminated. We are no longer free to wear casual clothes in place of our uniforms on Fridays. Furthermore, anyone found smoking within three blocks of the school will be immediately suspended.

As I wait at One Hundred Tenth Street for the Number Four bus ("What's yellow and green and comes in bunches? The Fifth Avenue Coach Line bus") at 8:30 in the morning, there, crossing Broadway with long strides, is Tom Smits.

"I guess One Hundred Tenth Street is going to continue to be our meeting spot," Tom says.

"I'm sorry for what happened at the game," I say. "I lost my head."

"That's all right. I always knew you were a real bruiser, a guy who speaks with his fists." Tom laughs.

Along the northern perimeter of Central Park the crowded and overheated bus crawls, the fare box making a periodic commotion as it sorts the coins. The driver turns down Fifth Avenue. Mount Sinai Hospital, the Museum of the City of New York, the Metropolitan Museum of New York. With each tranverse it comes to, I realize the advantages of having a school on the other side of the vast park, its fields covered with snow and the trees in their winter bareness. The compartments of my life can be kept more easily separate, each passing street put more and more distance between me and the building where I live.

Just down the block from the quiet formality of the Frick Museum, between Fifth and Madison Avenues, a five-story former hospital now houses our school. There is no yard to flee into and in place of creaky wooden stairs, a marble staircase to the upper floors—or an elevator, should you choose. The fluorescent lighting gives the halls and classrooms the brightness of a supermarket.

"You didn't know we were moving until last week? You didn't know? How could you not know? The move has been talked about for months. People, listen to this.

Garatdj didn't even know that we would be here until his parents got a notice in the mail. Can you believe it?" Freddy Snyder's voice registered his disbelief.

"You be careful, Freddy. Gideon has a gang. He's really going to sic it on you," Lance says, as he has before.

"Do you really have a gang?" Frank asks.

"No," I say.

"Say, Garatdj, what kind of name is that anyway? You told me once. Is it Persian or something?"

"There is no Persia, Freddy. I think it's called Iran," Lance says, winking at me.

"Well, okay, but one of those countries. You know what I mean."

"Nobody knows what you mean," Lance says, laughing.

New location or not, I must inspect every word, every last one. Hold each one up to the light. Inspect it from different angles. Let nothing out without thinking first. You must. You must.

And yet, what a perfect world, I think, as the day progresses. Jane and I will finish high school and then I will go off to college. Maybe she will too, although she doesn't seem very interested in school. We will be in different states, but not so far away that we can't see each other. And maybe I will see some other girl and she will find a boy to be with, because we are supposed to live a little before we get married and settle down. Still, we will love only each other. We will sort of suspend and preserve our love for each other, and then when our four years of college are up, we will resume all over again, and go on as if there had been no interruption at all. Though I haven't talked to Jane about the matter, I am sure the future will work out just that way.

In French class I steal looks at Robin Abel several rows ahead. She is tall and thin and perfect, every strand of her long black hair always in place. Well, not quite perfect. There is the small eruption of acne on her right cheek, but even that somehow adds to her luster. Jesus, just look at her with those thin, strong legs sheathed in black tights she wears with her gray skirt. Other days it is a plaid skirt she wears. And sometimes there are those cute kneesocks. She reads *Paris Match*. She reads Albert Camus in French. She knows the *plusque parfait* perfectly. Robin Abel lives two blocks from the new school, on Park Avenue. Her father is a fur importer.

Diane Coleman is seated in the same row as Robin. Her hair is strawberry blond and she has a mildly freckled face. She too reads *Paris Match* and Camus in French and knew the *plusque parfait* perfectly. She has been Coleman the last two years, and before that she had been Gaynor. Her mother is a former Miss America. They live over on Sutton Place in a duplex apartment with her new father, a big industrialist with offices all over the world.

I hear things. That is how I know. It is not information I would ask for. I wouldn't dare. I think back to all the confidence I had on those sleeping pills Momma gave me. Not that I could ever approach Diane Coleman. All the pills in the world wouldn't help me there, given her meanness. But maybe I could approach Robin. Maybe I could go out with someone like her when I go off to college. But then, seeing Bert Bach and Robin smile easily at each other, I sink back into my seat with deep and overpowering relief that I have not acted on this impulse. ("Did you hear what Flathead went and did? Did you hear he went to Robin and asked her for her phone number? Have you ever heard anything funnier in your whole life?")

Old Mlle. Gallimard—it is whispered that she is almost seventy—walks between the rows of desk, and stops at mine. “Lisez cette maxim, en Anglais, s’il vous plait.”

There is a slight quiver in her heavily rouged and powdered face as she speaks.

“Whom one has ceased to love, one cannot love a second time,” I say. We have been reading the maxims of LaRochefoucauld.

“Parfait,” she replies. I feel warmed by her response, but flinch when she pats me on the head.

But as the day goes on, the maxim stays in my consciousness, and the following day as well. Some unsettling and unasked for truth has been presented and is now ripping a hole in my life. How am I supposed to stay with Jane and live at the same time when the Frenchman is saying that once Jane and I go off and lead separate lives during college, we cannot get back together again because there will only be deadness between us. All those happy days and months spent with Jane, with the future promising nothing but the same, and now some aphorist from the eighteenth century just comes along and terminates that happiness?

Once again I hear talk of parties and dates. Yes, Bert Bach will be going out with Robin Abel this weekend and Diane Coleman has been seeing a boy for the last week who is a freshman at Columbia. How heartless. How cold. Where is the love and warmth in such experimentation? I will not hurt Jane with that kind of coldness.

The future must be grabbed. It must be held on to and made to stand still. But however I try to fit Jane into it, the construction falls apart. The future is now pain, a problem without a solution.

The cafeteria is sunk in the basement and awash in ugly fluorescent lighting. A boy from the grade below approaches my table. He walks in a spastic way, one arm held in against his side and one of his legs also angled inward and slightly buckled. The boy takes a seat and contorts his face as he struggles to pull open the waxed container holding his half-pint of milk. On his tray is a gloppy egg salad sandwich, some of the egg falling from between the slices of bread as he lifts it to his mouth. He masticates with his mouth open, globs of yellow stuck in the heavy braces on his teeth. We eat in silence.

Mr. Horst-Lehman, the Claremont principal, also teaches sophomore English. The array of tailored suits and jackets he appears before us in suggest a wardrobe even vaster than Mr. Arbuckle's. In contrast with his elegant outfits is his meaty face, dotted with warts and moles; his jowls hang slack like the seat of his pants, and those ears rival an elephant's in their enormity. He has a habit of regularly moistening his thin lips with his pointed tongue, like some poisonous snake might do.

Mr. Horst-Lehman's face and wardrobe and reptilian tongue would have no particular interest for me, nor would I call attention to how Mr. Horst-Lehman puts his arms around the prettier girls like Diane and Robin between classes out in the hallways or mention whisperings about his lechery, or the rumors that Miss Redding, with her pinup figure, is more than his secretary, if not for an incident that occurs.

We have been reading *Henry IV, Part One*, and it is the theme of redemption that makes the play so gripping. As the play opens, Harry, King Henry's son, is spending his time in a tavern with Falstaff and Bardolph and other lowlife, in marked contrast with Hotspur, the son of the king's rival Northumberland. How amazing to read of Hotspur as

a warrior who is "the theme of honour's tongue" for his courage in battle, a warrior who can ride his horse "on the perpendicular."

"Mark, it's awfully stuffy in the room. Would you open the window a crack?" Mr. Horst-Lehman asks one afternoon, startling me out of a daydream. With uncontrollable self-consciousness, as if all eyes have been drawn to me, I rise to perform the task.

"That is, if he is able to. We're not exactly looking at Hercules," Mr. Horst-Lehman chuckles, eliciting loud laughter from the class.

When the handle of the casement window won't turn, my face face turns even redder.

"Is virility incarnate having a problem?" Mr. Horst-Lehman asks, with mock sincerity, to more laughter.

I try to appear nonchalant even as I struggle with the stubborn handle and want to hurl a good-sized rock right through the window to teach the goddamn thing. Finally I can crank it open and return to my seat with a smile meant to show that I haven't been at all hurt by Mr. Horst-Lehman's jab.

"Do they really think they're going to boost this school's status by cramming us into some old hospital just to give us an East Side address? There are some strange-looking people walking around in this uniform. Does anyone think Arnold Hillman is a good advertisement for this school?" Tom laughs and shakes his head at the preposterousness of the idea as we wait for the bus back to the West Side.

I think back to the spastic kid I shared a table with back in the cafeteria.

"I mean, some of these cretins can't write a line of iambic pentameter."

Nor can I, probably, I think, feeling sorry for Arnold Hillman, now that he is Tom's target.

The bus pulls to a stop at One Hundred Tenth Street and Broadway.

"What do you say I come home with you now? We'll watch a little TV."

"No. Not today."

"Look. I'll bring over our TV if you don't have one."

I leave him with the same smile I had shown Mr. Horst-Lehman.

In my room that night the smile falls away as I think of how Mr. Horst-Lehman's remark just froze me and dropped me in the lake of shame the way Tom's remark about the TV did the same. I think of how Mr. Horst-Lehman has probably been waiting all along to crush me, knowing me and my family are not Claremont quality. I think of Edward Macy losing my glove back in fourth grade and those boys at camp who carried me out of my bed and took me by my ankles and my arms and swung me back and forth to gain the necessary momentum to pitch me forward into the lake and didn't even wait and see if I could get out and how everyone has the right to just walk right over me, and as I think, my anger just grows and grows.

The air is soft now, the days have grown longer, and Scully's stoop has begun to call. It just calls and calls.

"Yo, my man is back," Luis goes, giving me a rap on the arm.

"Yo, Flathead," Scully goes.

"Yo, private school punk, where you been? Do I have to kick your ass for disappearing?" Jimmy Riley goes.

But Philip goes, "You manage to get your dick in that girl yet?"

I see blazing hatred in Philip's small eyes. I see Philip's barrel chest and thick legs. The butterflies have started to flutter. I am there only a minute, and I am about to get in a fight I will badly lose.

Nearby Sean is carrying soda bottles down to the basement for sorting in wooden boxes. Back and forth he goes between the basement and the store.

"I guess Head's having a hard day. He sure is blowing awfully hard," Philip says, in a loud voice. "Get it, Scully? Blowing hard?"

"Oh shit, your ass is grass now, my man." Luis says. Philip turns in time to see Sean charging, grabs a piece of plywood with a long nail in it, and swings and misses at Sean's head. Several hard shots to the face later, Philip is on the pavement. He staggers to his feet, his hand cupped over his bleeding mouth. Blood has stained his striped oxford shirt and khaki pants, which are torn at the knee. Jimmy tries to help, but Philip stiff-arms him out of the way and runs off across the avenue holding his mouth in a rage of humiliation.

"Damn, fucking Sean," Luis says, reminded that Sean can and will move against anyone.

"Fucked up Philip," Kevin says.

"Do you still not talk to Sean?" Jane asks.

"I've been keeping my distance."

"He's so violent." She has heard about Philip and how Sean made him run away with his hand over his bleeding mouth.

"Philip is a wise guy. He beats up on people with his mouth. He'll also hit you in the head with a bat when you're not looking."

"I guess that's why Sean beat you up, too, huh?"

"That was different."

"Whatever Philip said, it doesn't give Sean the right to do that to him."

"I guess not." I wonder if she remembers my own violence, which took place on the Columbia campus, not far from where we now sit.

"You seem to still like Sean," she says.

I could say the same to her about Philip, from the way she is defending him.

"Does he still have that room downtown?"

"I guess so."

"What do they do down there, anyway?"

"They play cards. They drink beer and whiskey. That sort of thing."

The uneasy smile on her face suggests that my answer has left out what really goes on down there—that Sean likes boys and that he has found boys who like him to take to that room. It is all right that she should express curiosity. I like the idea that there is some part of my life that is beyond her control.

The playing field needs some care. The infield is hard and rocky, and in portions of the outfield the grass has died, leaving ugly bald spots.. The field sits there, year after year, as neglected and unused as the cathedral of which it is a part. Though I have not been beyond the cathedral's huge doors in years, I remember the straight-back chairs with hard cushions and the little chapels in a semicircle beyond the altar, with its huge organ, and

the vestments worn by the Episcopal bishop and the complicated liturgy. Episcopal. What is that? It feels like a religion as cold as the stone floors of the cathedral itself. And looking back, the school, St. Andrews, which loosely affiliates itself with the cathedral, seems cold and forbidding—those veiled and stern nuns going about the streets like flocks of urban penguins.

As I stare through the fence at the playing field, a voice calls my name from a distance. It is a voice I instantly recognize but only slowly turn to acknowledge, as it is one thing to warm to Sean in my mind but another altogether to interact with him. And there he is, standing bare-chested in the third-floor window of his apartment a block away. If Sean has any similar inhibition, he hurtles past it with his rough bark. "I got me tickets for the Mets and Cincinnati tonight. You coming?"

No auxiliary verb. No need for one. Everything from Sean is urgency and command. And yet, in his semi-naked pose, he projects not so much power as vulnerability. How easy it would be to reply with a no or simply not respond at all and close the door on him with finality. But how unkind it would be to reject him, how painfully sad and hurtful.

"Sure," I call, ignoring the small voice within counseling otherwise.

An hour later our cab pulls up at the Polo Grounds, up at One Hundred Fifty-fifth Street. Batting practice is underway, and in the twilight Sean and I run down balls hit into the stands along the first base line, managing to grab a few in the scramble that ensues with other fans at the sparsely attended game.

Our seats are directly behind home plate, with a view out past the pitcher's mound to the locker rooms under the Rheingold sign beyond the vast center field. The ballpark has

sat empty for years, since the Giants left town, but now the Mets were playing there while a new stadium is being built in Queens.

“You want something, you just say. It’s on me,” Sean says. The smell of ballpark franks has made me hungry, and Sean shouts out our orders in a voice as loud as those of the hawking vendors.

“I’m doing good, Gideon. I’m on a fucking roll. I’m like Frankie boy. I’m like a fucking chairman of the board.” Sean makes no mention of the room of our incident in the room or the one with Philip. The reality is there but not there, too big to be spoken of.

From delivery boy to chairman of the board. Sean is too much to try to understand, or maybe too little, though I try once again not to think that way.

In the second year of their existence, the Mets are still a ragtag expansion team, and the Milwaukee Braves are not the pennant-winning team they had been some years before. But they have Aaron and they have sweet-swinging Eddie Mathews and they have southpaw Warren Spahn with the elegant windup and delivery. Since the Dodgers and Giants fled after the 1957 season, I have dreamed of the return of National League baseball, and now here it is. Not that it is the same. It could never be the same: Johnny Podres jumping ecstatically into the embrace of Campy after shutting down the Yankees in that seventh game in 1955. Yes, the Duke, with all those forty-homer years in Brooklyn, is here, but as an old and part-time player not in Dodger blue but a different uniform—and not even the usual number 4 on his back but number 28.

That night, as the cab climbs Coogan's Bluff and flies down Broadway, I see once again that Sean can arrange these evenings and believe he is in control, but it is only the

appearance of things. After all, what control can he really have, given that he needs me more than I need him. Of course, that is a nice thing, the feeling of being needed.

“Keep the change,” Sean says, handing the hackie a twenty, then turns to me. “I’m headed up to Boston in about two weeks to see Fenway Park. You coming?”

Sean has been so nice. Why disappoint him or make him angry? Why not just go along for the ride? “Sure,” I say. “Why not?”

“But Gideon, this is very good. An A in history and an A in Latin,” Momma says, in the privacy of the bathroom. She has seen what I have also seen on the report card—a B+ in geometry and a B in English. I have fallen and her words are not enough to lift me up because they convey that she knows that I have fallen.

It has taken a while for Mr. Horst-Lehman to see beyond my blond hair to my Negro nose and lips. Mr. Arbuckle has aided this reevaluation by informing Mr. Horst-Lehman of my low mathematical aptitude, my inability to grasp theorems involving rectangles and parallelograms and rhombuses and the rest of it. They are catching on. And, of course, there is the weakness I showed in dropping the biology class.

I am quite certain something of this very kind is going on, but there is no need to tell Momma. I am too old and her ears are too tired of the language of defeat.

When you have tooth pain, you treat it yourself if you know what is good for you. You do not go to Dr. Millsley and allow him to send sparks of pain shooting through your body when his slow drill strikes a nerve. You remember that childhood experience of sitting in his chair in Rockefeller Center and stay away. You pack aspirin into the hole in the molar on the lower right side of your mouth. That way the aspirin can take direct action against the pain by attacking it at its source, whereas if

you swallow the aspirin it goes to all different parts of your body and what good is that? And after you take the aspirin, you lie still on your bed and moan softly, so you and no one else can hear.

After three days of this misery, I surrender to a neighborhood dentist, Dr. Louise Gralik, and when I leave her Claremont Avenue office that school-day morning with the cavity filled and walk up toward Broadway, I can be proud that I haven't continued to run and hide.

Only 8:30 am, according to the wall clock in Chock Full O' Nuts. My lip feels the size of a pillow from the Novocain, making the coffee hard to sip. There is still time to make my first class if I hurry. I can put a stop to this indulgence with Sean and say no, I don't want him in my life. I can say to him, "You are not good for me. I want to be with those kids who frighten me because of their abilities and all they represent. I want to be pulled into their light and not into your darkness." All that I can say simply by leaving right now.

And even if I am late for my first class, an emergency dental appointment is a legitimate excuse. But then, wouldn't it be better to let the day go and start fresh the next morning? There is something not right about coming in late. No, get back. Get back now. In a moment of clarity, it is all there, right before my eyes. I remember Momma ironing my shirt for me earlier in the morning. Doesn't she want the best for me? Hasn't she worked so hard? I see Hannah's sloth and the disaster of my institution-prone sister Naomi. And what about Rachel, the one we seldom see, and her downward spiral? And what about Luke, with a high school transcript so miserable that he isn't even being encouraged to go to college? Is that what I want for myself?

I picture Ogden Connifer, tall and lanky and pimpled, sitting in Latin class with his spine curved, easily translating a passage from Caesar's Gallic campaign. I see John Edel confidently offering some insight on *Crime and Punishment*, which we are now reading, and Mr. Horst-Lehman

nodding in approval. I see all my classmates within the walls of a sanctuary whose doors will close on me if I am not there in the next half hour.

As I push through the revolving door, there, across the street, is Sean bounding past the male and female statuary on pedestals that flank the entranceway to the Columbia University mall. Frozen by his stare, I stand outside as, mindless of the traffic, Sean streaks across Broadway.

"Was my man splitting? Boston, baby. We're bound for Boston." Before I can respond, he has flagged a cab and I am inside.

I tell myself that I am free to jump out at any stop light, was free to jump out at any light, but paralyzing indecision and the momentum of the cab keep me in place. And it was the same at the Port Authority Terminal. Breathing in the sickening exhaust fumes, I passively move forward with the line and hand the driver the ticket Sean has purchased for me. Soon the big Greyhound is passing through the gritty streets of Hell's Kitchen, the gears grinding when the driver downshifts for lights and in traffic.

"What's the matter? You going to cry over being away from that snotty school? This is school." Sean laughs loudly and pulls on his Philip Morris, then contentedly let out a stream of smoke.

Gray clouds have settled in, and soon a steady rain is falling as we reach the interstate and follows us up the northeast corridor.

Hours later, when the bus pulls into a depot near Kenmore Square, the rain has not relented.

"We're not going back. We're going to stay another day so we can see us some baseball," Sean says, in the depressing bus station, squashing my unspoken hope that we will just turn around and head home. And yet maybe it is all right to continue, I think, remembering how defeated I was

by homesickness at those summer camps. And it helps when Sean says, in a less jeering way, "Don't worry. We'll find a hotel. I look old enough to get us a room."

We ride on a trolley car to somewhere. On a back street, away from the major hotels, we find a small rooming house.

"Where is your luggage?" the woman at the front desk says.

"We don't have any luggage," Sean says.

"You'll have to be out at ten o'clock tomorrow morning unless you want to be charged for another day."

The room she shows us to has an alleyway view and beds with mattresses no thicker than the weekday *Times*, but at least there are two of them.

The rain has stopped. In wet socks we head to the Boston Common, where ducks move smoothly over the pond. There is a street called Tremont and another called Boylston. Near Huntington Avenue stands Symphony Hall. And there the Park Street church with its single white spire before we come to the bridge spanning the Charles River, where rowing crews practice on the water.

Back in downtown Boston, Sean punches me on the arm. "It's them. It's them. Look, Luis. And there's Brooks." Sean's face is a feverish with excitement. And yes, Luis Aparicio and Brooks Robinson, the left side of the Orioles' infield, are standing outside their hotel, one sharp-featured and the other round-faced. "And there's Mikey and Stu," he goes on, meaning Mike McCormick and Stu Miller, pitchers who have come to the Orioles from the Giants in an interleague trade. I stare at the players on the red-carpeted stairs with envy, not because they play baseball for a living, but because they are where they are supposed to be. For a moment I see the horror of vicariousness, of rooting for teams and individual stars while neglecting my own life.

"I have a collect call for a Mrs. Garatdjian," The operator says, that evening. My aunt has picked up the phone.

"A call from where?"

"From Boston, ma'am."

"What is that you say?"

"Boston, ma'am. A collect call from Boston."

"Who is calling, did you say?"

"His name is Gideon, ma'am."

"Gideon?"

"It's me, Auntie. Gideon."

"Oh, Gideon." She starts to laugh her Auntie Eve laugh. It can go on for some time if not interrupted.

"Ma'am, is the party there to accept the call?"

"Party?"

"Auntie Eve, please get my mother."

Now Momma is on the line.

"Is this Mrs. Garatdjian?" the operator asks?

"It is I."

"I have a collect call from Gideon. Will you accept the charges?"

"Gideon?"

"Me. Your son. Remember?"

"But Gideon, where are you?"

"I'm in Boston."

"Boston? You are in Boston?"

"Ma'am, do you accept the call?" the operator interjects.

"Yes, of course."

"I know it's crazy and you won't believe me, but I came up here to see a baseball game.

We're going to have to stay over, but I'll be home by tomorrow night. I promise."

"We? Who is we?"

"Sean." I flinch saying his name, and wonder why he hasn't lied.

"It was he who put you up to this, is it not?"

"We just wanted to see a baseball game."

"There are no baseball games in New York City?"

"We wanted to go someplace different."

"Where on earth are you staying?"

"We got a hotel room. Sean looks older than he is."

"You are telling me something I do not know?"

It is a mistake for me to laugh.

"But Gideon, we cannot have this. What ails you? Do you know that the school called this afternoon when you did not show up? I have been worried sick that something happened. Is this what you give me after all my hard work? Look at what all you children have done. First it is one and then it is another and all of you going on in your willful ways without a thought of me."

I can hear her crying. It seems at that moment I can remember all her tears over the years, and the resolutions they have prompted in me to do better.

"Momma, I promise to be back by tomorrow night. This won't happen again. You'll see."

"Well, if you say so."

He makes a second call that night, charging it to his home number.

"But that's crazy," Jane says, when I tell her where I am.

"Why?"

"It just is. It's a school day and you're in Boston with him?" I like the way she places such heavy stress on *him*.

"I miss you. Do you miss me?" I say.

"Well, I guess so. 'Where is the boy I see you with? The one who likes to kiss?' Mr. Funelli said to me this afternoon. Then he winked and put his arm around me. Gross. He's not very clean for someone who handles food all day." She goes on about how Scully and Kevin and the rest of them teased her for the way she walks, because she is kind of pigeon-toed.

All that talk about Mr. Funelli and kissing and Scully and Kevin and the rest of them, as if life goes merrily on without me when I had been close to tears several times that day thinking about her. Some powerful soreness drives me back to the phone.

"You want to see someone else, right? Why don't you just say it? Who's it going to be, Philip with the busted mouth again? Or do you need someone whose mouth isn't all busted up?"

She answers with some of her own fire. "Don't you know how to get off the phone? You run up to Boston with that maniac and then you accuse me of stuff. Sometimes I think you're really crazy, do you know that? Are you going to call me fifty times tonight? Is that your plan?"

I make a vibrating sound by running my finger back and forth over my lips.

"What the hell is that noise?"

"What the hell do you think it is?" I say. I know she is going histrionic on me, that she is putting on a show of anger for her parents, so they can all assume the feel-good posture of the justifiably outraged.

The phone is like being stuck in tar. I call her back to try to get things straightened out.

“Closing time, Sport. Closing time,” Jane’s father says, before slamming down the receiver.

Sean lies in his bed smoking a cigarette, one arm under his head. He is still dressed, except for his shoes. "What's the matter, baby? Miss Mommy? Miss Jane?"

“I’m okay,” I say.

"This is only the beginning. Next I'll be going to Chicago and Pittsburgh and Philadelphia and Houston and Los Angeles and everywhere else, too. I'll be seeing Willie and Juan at Candlestick. I'll be seeing Gordie Howe on his home ice in Detroit. I'll be seeing Frankie boy out at the Sands in Las Vegas. Because I'm going places, not like those stiffy you hang around with on Scully's stoop. I know how to make things happen."

I nod.

"You're a sarcastic son of a bitch behind that smile. You don't even have to say anything for it to come out."

Mark lie in bed in my pants and a T-shirt. My blazer and white shirt hang in the closet. My plan is to remove my pants when Sean turns out the light so Sean won't make fun of my skinny legs.

"Whose idea was that religious sign on the side of your building, anyway?"

"It was Jesus' idea."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Just that."

"What do you mean, just that?"

"Jesus even had it painted, too."

"Jesus had that fucking sign painted?"

"Sure he did."

"You talk some sick shit."

"The truth is not sick shit."

"What kind of religion is that you belong to, anyway?"

"Pentecostal."

"Penta what?"

"The Holy Spirit that descended to earth after Christ's ascension to heaven. It can be in anyone, even you. A lot of hellfire and brimstone."

"Like that movie with Burt Lancaster. *Elmer Gantry*."

"Sort of." There had been ads all over the subway. *Elmer Gantry is coming*.

Like throwing meat to a hungry lion to keep him away. It feels like that.

"Private school. Pentecostal. Everything about you has to be different." He lights another cigarette with the one he's smoked all the way down. "All those priests and pastors and ministers are like that Elmer Gantry guy. I don't care what the religion is. They're all on the take."

I listen to Sean's self-serving cynicism as the rain begins again to fall and beat against the window. The world is full of lies, my own and his included. The day had been a big mistake and the night is now a giant obstacle between Jane and school and Momma and my life.

With the light off, there is now only the tiny glow of Sean's cigarette. We are in the deeper part of the night now. I can feel the current of Sean's thoughts, as if they are a palpable, threatening thing.

"You don't have to pretend you're sleeping. You don't have to pretend anything. I know who you are. I've always known who you are."

"I'm Gideon. That's who I am," I say.

"You want me to come over? All you got to do is say yes. You want that, Gideon?"

Sean was reading me in the dark, listening for weakness in my silence, my breath.

"You know who I've been fucking recently, Markie boy? How about loudmouthed Jimmy Riley? Don't think he doesn't love it. Oooh, Rob Koley, too."

The springs squeak in Sean's bed. The light from the cigarette moves closer.

"I'm here, Markie, I'm right here."

There is really no power in me to deny him. There is only the darkness to hide this fact.

The air speaks of inevitability and the lightning overhead supports it. Rain is falling and the slimy mud makes footing treacherous. The Mexican holds his knife loosely to suggest his casual intimacy with the weapon. As he switches the knife from hand to hand, relishing its heft, he lashes his tongue from side to side of his dry mouth. His prey, in a sombrero absurdly large for his peculiar head, is no match. All he can show is a votive candle, its wick unlit.

At 8 am the man has five o'clock shadow. "How you want those eggs?" He speaks gruffly, and Sean replies in kind. It doesn't matter what city he is in—he isn't taking any shit.

The stench of old grease spreads through the diner as the grill heats up. It takes everything not to run out into the street. Flies buzz the fatty strips of bacon that Sean has ordered with his eggs. At the end of the counter sit dirty dishes in a gray bin.

I have a cup of coffee and orange juice and toast without butter.

"You eat like a fucking girl," Sean says. When his own food comes, he attacks it. The eggs slide around on the plate but soon everything is gone, even the mound of blackened hash browns

and the yolk, which Sean sops up with a piece of white bread. Nothing can hurt me, he is saying. It is all there to be devoured.

"I got to go back to the room," he says, and goes straight for the bed and falls asleep in his clothes and shoes when we get there. An hour later the landlady bangs on our door as I am brushing my teeth with my finger and hand soap and tells us to leave. Sean gives her no fire. He does not push her soreness back into her face.

In a park near the Museum of Fine Arts, the ducks glide back and forth under a small wooden bridge spanning the pond as Sean lies dozing on the grass in the warm sun.

It is the same thing at the ballpark. By the second inning, Sean has nodded off in his seat, his head and upper body listing into the aisle. When I shake him, he straightens up.

The Polo Grounds is weird--you could hit a 251-foot home run down the line--but Fenway is even stranger, with the giant green wall just beyond the infield in left field and this big net on top of it. It is a ballpark contained by the neighborhood around it, the stuff of dreams—its light towers rising above the surrounding buildings.

Another inning passes and Sean is half into the aisle again. The cigarette he holds has an inch-long ash. He has begun to drool. Once more I shake him.

"Let's get out of here," Sean says. He is unsteady on his feet and walks slowly.

From the ballpark comes the short-lived roar of the fans. A base hit? A home run? Who cares? Again I find myself imagining John Edel or Ogden Connifer or Bert Bach watching some dumb game in a strange city on a school day rather than marching ahead with their own lives.

"We're broke," Sean says. Some change has spilled from his pocket and I pick the coins off the pavement. A nearby street vendor hawking Red Sox pennants and caps gives us directions to the

turnpike, and some blocks later, I stand off the westbound ramp with my thumb out while Sean lies in the grass.

The driver of a van hits the brakes. "Is your friend all right?" the guy behind the wheel says. Sean has fallen asleep again in the rear seat, his head against the window.

"He's just tired. He had a long night," I say. The sun is now high in the sky. We are going home.

"But Gideon, what is the meaning of such a thing? Did you take leave of your senses?"

"I don't know," I say, tearing into the chicken breast she has brought me with a plate of rice.

"But tell me, and I won't breathe a word to a living soul. Is this man normal?"

"Sure. He's real normal," I say.

That night I hear my father's footsteps in the hallway. He doesn't knock on the door or enter. How good that Momma keeps my father out of my life.

"Why do you want to go down there?" Jane Thayer says, as we enter the park.

"Tall Tommy," I say.

"Tall Tommy?"

"He took Luke and me down here when we were little and taught us how to find wild scallions and what springs in the park were safe to drink from. He played a harmonica that made a lonely sound and sang 'Home on the Range.'" I do not tell her about the feeling of danger, of knives all around, and that false moves shouldn't be made or voices raised, lest those hiding in the dark come out and hurt them.

The improvised swing, a tire tied by thick rope to the branch of a tree, is gone, but the cars are still there, in rapid motion northbound and southbound on the highway.

Down into the lower drive we now are, past Dead Man's Hill and the tennis courts. I take her hand as we cross the exit road from the highway between the park and the river that leads down toward One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street.

"Are you sure this is OK?" Jane says.

There is hope down here: the river, the railroad, the highway, all heading north as well as south, and the Chevrolet billboard up ahead beckoning you to the open road that looms. I don't know what it is, only that it makes me crazy inside to be here, as if past and present are merging. Something. It is the city breaking out of its confinement. It is nature calling to civilization and civilization calling to nature. It is both and neither. It is the railroad that runs like a fever through all of life.

The knoll is thick with prickly shrubs. On the other side of the fence below are the railroad tracks and not far south the mouth of the tunnel through which the trains run, just as these things were when we came with Tall Tommy.

"Here?" she asks, when we come to a small opening sufficient to lie down. I see on her face a smile of amazement.

Above, cars race along the exit ramp, and now a southbound train is agitating the outdoor air with its power before roaring into the waiting tunnel.

I unbutton her blouse but fumble with the clasp of her white bra. "I'll do it," she says, sitting up and loosening the bra effortlessly.

I hear a sound in the brush and then I hear it again. And though I do not hear it a third time, it is there in my mind, growing and growing. This is not Dead Man's Hill. This is a secluded area.

"We've got to go," I whisper.

"Why? What's happening?"

"Please," I say. I do not want my life or hers to end. He know this city and the knives waiting to be used.

Run, Gideon, run. Run from the er-re-ra man. Run from Salvatore Negron. Run from your father and the whistling of the wind. Run with Jane Thayer down the exit road to the viaduct, past the meat-packing plants and the garages to the laughable safety of Broadway.

I pause outside the geometry classroom. My homework is incomplete because of a theorem I can't grasp. The idea comes to me to skip the class and flee into the open spaces of the street.

The cherry blossom trees are in bloom, tired-looking horses clip-clop along pulling hansom cabs and their tourist cargo, and Negro nannies push strollers with the bundled white babies in their care. The doorman stand outside their buildings enjoying the spring breeze. One minute I am at the school with no thought of leaving and the next I am whizzing up the avenue, with angry thoughts I can't outrun of Mr. Arbuckle purposely confusing me with complicated theorems and axioms and postulates. Thwarting me, just thwarting me, the way Momma used to stall me, just stall me.

The basin of the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park is empty and cluttered with garbage. On the lake a man works the oars of a rowboat. I climb the stairs to the deserted band shell. Rows of chairs, all of them empty, have been set out. I remember the flying tackle the plainclothes detective made, bringing me hard to the ground, after I overturned the overflowing garbage can. How long ago the incident seems.

To Kill a Mockingbird is playing at an East Side theater. I step into the air-conditioned darkness, leaving behind the daylight and the realities of that realm —the Claremont School and its cruel, demanding teachers and rich, snobby students—for a couple of hours in a cushioned chair. No censorious and controlling older sister to clamp her hand on my shoulder and drag me from the theater like an angry and avenging Fury. No classroom self-consciousness. I am free, and in that freedom fall in love with the narrator's angel Southern voice and under the spell of the drama on the screen. Gregory Peck so handsome in the role of Uncle Atticus and noble and just and brave in his defense of the poor Negro man unjustly accused of rape in a Southern town so full of prejudice and itching to lynch. And yet, even the thrall of the film does not keep me from several times walking up the aisle and to the bathroom, where I stand over a urinal hoping for a like-minded man to enter, but none comes in the stolen leisure of that spring afternoon in 1963.

Sean is not riding his delivery bike with his head tilted at an angle of triumph in the early part of the summer. He is not bellowing “A Foggy Day in London Town” or going to war with Frenchie the Algerian in Riverside Park and leaving him unconscious on the baseball diamond or applying superior force to the face of Philip, causing him to run home for the relief he can find with blood flowing from his smart mouth. He is not walking with a strut as if by gait alone he can transcend the world and circumstances he has been born into and elevate into the realm of *class*. For a while that summer, Sean is not a Celtic warrior riding naked on a bareback steed into battle but an invalid in a hospital gown lying weak in an adjustable bed in a semiprivate room in St. Luke’s Hospital only a short walk from Scully’s stoop and Funelli’s grocery and the strip of Amsterdam Avenue that has become my home away from home.

After our Boston trip Sean had shown up at the emergency room with yellow skin, where he was diagnosed with hepatitis. I think of the filthy diner, remembering the stench of old grease and

the flies on the bacon. But there are also whisperings that he had gotten sick from sex with men. Vagueness and mystery attach to Sean's condition.

Hepatitis—an ugly word, like a big, flapping bird covered with fungi.

It is something to see powerful Sean in the loose-fitting white gown with a V-neck that reveals his hairy chest and an identification band around his thick wrist and the nurse bringing him a tray of food and instructing him to sit up and eat. The illness that has laid him low has also humanized him. The lion is in need of people's care. He is being made to see where his power ends.

Sean's father comes to visit one afternoon. He is a small man with the face of a cat. That Sean has a connection to this older man, who works at the northern tip of Manhattan in the subway yard, is another source of wonder. I do not so much care about Scully's red-nosed father or Jimmy Riley's lanky father, who are regularly seen carrying their bags of beer home after work. But Sean's father is another matter. He and Sean are the same, and yet they are different. I can't get it straight in my mind and don't know why I should care. It was just Sean's hold on me. That's all it is, as if every move I make, no matter how many others are around, is for Sean. Sean is watching me, even when his head is turned, and I am watching him, no matter where my eyes are looking.

"You go over and get in that bed there," Sean's father says to Jane during her one visit. He speaks to her in a raspy voice and points to an empty bed, and it is my concern that she will go up against him with some smart words that hurt his feelings and spark his anger.

"Fat chance," she laughs.

Then comes the afternoon when Sean sours on me, seemingly out of the blue, and with Scully and Luis and Kevin Donnelly and Jimmy Riley in the room. Sean saying, "You just come here because you don't have anywhere else to go. Why don't you get out of here?"

And so I smile, as if no words whatsoever have come from him. But Sean's anger has developed some momentum. The hepatitis has taken away his power to punch, but it has not taken away his voice. "Didn't you hear me? Get out. Beat it." I feel burned by Sean's words but maintain the smile that was on my face the night Sean beat me in the downtown room.

Beating me again, just beating me, every word he spoke being true.

"Your hands cold?" Sam, the manager, of the TasteRite Supermarket, says.

"No," I answer.

"So get them out of your pockets," Sam says. Same wears a gray smock over his white shirt. Ove the right pocket of the smock the name "Sam" is stiched in red letters.

I restock the shelves with goods taken from cardboard boxes and sort the empties into their wooden cases down in the basement, bringing order where there had been none. And then there are the deliveries I get to make, flying down the hill on the wagon bike and pushing it back up the hill because I don't have the leg strength to pedal my way to the top. It makes me happy to be working. It gives me a sense of purpose. Momma is in my mind's eye. I feel her approval all throughout me that I am not like my floundering older sisters.

Meats are stored in the basement freezer, and one morning Sam sends me down to the basement for a box of franks. But the thick metal door closes with authority after I have entered the freezer, and though he try, I cannot open it. Within a minute the summer heat has disappeared from my body and I begin to feel a chill, there amid the hanging sides of beef. And now there are goose bumps on my arm. A rat emerges from under a shelf. The rat has it worse. Its coat is covered with ice. No darting and spurting and leaping for this rat. It can only inch forward toward the door, where it too awaits liberation.

But suppose there is no liberation? Suppose the morning and afternoon pass and Sam calls it a day and empties the cash registers and turns out the light and I am left all alone with the cold and the rat and the cold has now entered deep in my bones and is freezing my heart?

“Caramba,” a Mexican worker says, a half hour later, jumping back when he opens the door and the rat totters out. The store cat jumps too, clear atop a stack of boxes.

It is her birthday and in her blue leather diary, with a gold lock, I write "iwtmysp." How safe I feel knowing she will never guess their meaning. But she has only studied the entry for less than a minute when she says, "I want to marry you someday, please," her laughter evoking shame in me once again that she should see me in such an available light.

Luke has been working hard this summer. He has not gone to the country place of the Episcopal nuns up in Westchester. Instead he has been working for Auntie Eve, coating the walls of the rooms she rents with the pale green that she favors. She does not want a color that shouts or walls that are chalky white. Europe is my brother's destination with the money he is saving. Europe will be the college he is not attending this fall.

"Nancy really loves me. She said so," Luke tells me on the warm, late August night before he is to leave, as we walk in Riverside Park. Nancy Becker will soon be up at Vassar, where my sister Rachel had been but is no more. Hearing my brother talk about love makes me want to abandon the very word.

Across the road is St. Andrew's, the former mansion a gloomy building of soiled white stone from another time when mansions lined the drive.

"Let's go over," Luke says.

There is the second-floor bathroom, from which I had tossed the toilet paper at the nuns back in sixth grade, and the wide stairway Momma had climbed to take me away, and the garden path I had walked after cleaning out my locker the next day.

“Remember when you were going to get working papers and a job and save up money so we could live together in our own apartment? That was one of the places where I wanted us to live,” I say, pointing to a fairly new apartment building of blond brick on the opposite corner. “It still makes me happy just to see it. It’s like the building glows.”

“It’s just a building,” Luke says. “Anyway, you’ll see. I’m not going to be like Hannah and Naomi. That’s for sure. You won’t find me rotting away in one of those rooms I’ve been painting.”

Farther south we come to a bridge over a roadway leading to and from the West Side Highway. Twin lamps stand on granite bases at either end of the arcing bridge. At the first lamp Luke stops and strikes a match.

"Tell me what you see in there," he says, holding the match between the base of the lamp and the retaining wall on which it rests.

"It looks like two coins. Pennies," I says.

"Yeah. We put them there the other night. They're like a wish. You know, that we'll always be together."

Iwtnmysp. Jesus.

Seven blocks later Luke stops me again. "Look over at the corner windows and count up five flights and three windows over. What do you see?" he asks, pointing to a huge building that follows the curve of the block it rises above.

"I see a window with no light in it."

"That's right. That's her room," Luke says, pointing to a darkened window.

Pennies under a bridge lamp and a dark window. My brother had found his Riverside Drive apartment, if only for a while, but it has not been with me. Time is funny. You think it will take you one way, and then it takes you another.

The cobblestones are slick from the downpour, the cab fishtailing around the curves of the West Side Highway as if racing over oily glass. Coming off the exit ramp I see the freighter still docked at the pier and wonder how such a small vessel can make an ocean crossing. The dark sky gives me a feeling of hopelessness, as if everything is out of control.

"Hey, here he is. Look, I want to give my little brother hope. I want to show him we can get away from One Hundred Thirteenth Street. Right, Gideon." Luke has his hand around a Heineken's in his cabin on the vessel.

Langley Farmer has come down to see Luke off, and Judson Iorg, another classmate of my brother's. There is only awkwardness between Langley and me now. We knew each other once, but now we are strangers. That shit-smearred sneaker with which I fouled his immaculate apartment.

"I guess so," I say. The big brother stuff is embarrassing. The silence that Langley and Judson maintain tell me they think so too.

"Where will you go when you get there?" Judson is skinny, with jug ears and a dumbfounded expression that may have been on his narrow face since birth.

"The first thing I'll be doing is renting a motorbike in Rotterdam. After that, I don't know. Just drive around, I guess." He makes the motorbike sound more interesting than the trip itself.

"But where are you going to drive around to?" Langley asks.

"I have these relatives in France and Sweden. I'll go see them. You poor guys will be in college while I'm floating around Europe and Scandinavia."

My father has only given Luke his sisters' address reluctantly, and with a warning not to "aggravate" them during his visit. From Marseilles Luke will go on to Paris, and then to Sweden to visit some of Momma's remaining relatives, whom she has also alerted to his possible arrival.

Luke pries off the cap on another bottle of Heineken's. "Nineteen cents on this tub. Can't beat that. Come on, Gideon. Have one. It's on me. This is a party, for God's sake."

The beer has a friendlier, softer taste than the city beers I drink with the boys from Scully's stoop. Before leaving I have a second.

That night I think of the freighter heading out of New York harbor deep into the ocean. I imagine the vast Atlantic overpowering the ship and claiming my brother. In bed I hold myself tightly so I won't shake apart.

A small thing happens at the start of my junior year, or if not a small thing, certainly nothing requiring a trial by jury. Still, the incident presents a facet of my being I don't care for. To my shame, there is present one who bears silent witness and stores the incident in her mind as evidence of my essential nature.

On the landing just outside the apartment door sit Vera and her friend Pam Becker as I return from school. They are a gauntlet I must run. "Hi, Gideon," they say, practically in unison, highlighting their bond and my aloneness. I hear their laughter as a mockery of my pale, thin existence.

Vera is tall now, and skinny, like me. Some kind of wound exists. I have trouble making eye contact. My father. Vera calling to him years before that I was bothering her. The look of satisfaction on her face after he had dealt his blows, as if our father was her father and not mine as well. As if she had stolen him.

Momma is having her afternoon coffee at the dining room table. "How was your first

day at school?" she asks, wearing a frown on her face.

"Okay," I say, anxious to change out of my new white button-down shirt, as the collar is chafing my neck.

"I just don't like it," Momma says.

"What don't you like?"

"The two of them sitting out there like that. It doesn't look right." Momma speaks in a voice that says she feels set upon.

"Have you told them not to?"

"Of course I did."

My bratty sister thinking she can intimidate me and distress Momma by imposing a reign of disorder. "I'll take care of it," I say.

They are still sprawled on the landing. "Get inside. Mommy doesn't want you sitting out here like this," I say, rushing my words.

"Momma doesn't want us sitting out here like this," Vera parrots, causing Pam to laugh.

I grab my sister's long brown hair.

"You jerk," she screams as I drag her into the living room.

"But what is the meaning of this?" Momma has come into the living room.

"You said you wanted them inside."

"Yes, but we cannot have this kind of violence. We cannot have it," Momma says.

I go to my room, where Vera and Pam cannot see me. But the disgust and the revulsion they are surely feeling have followed me. They have seen me behave like my father, and what could be worse than that? I have been made to get up. I have been

aggravated. And like my sister Hannah, too, have I behaved. I have dragged Vera inside the apartment just as Hannah had dragged me from the movie theater. I turn my face to the wall now that the whole world has seen what I have done. Hairs are growing everywhere, all over my face and my back and my arms. So great do they grow on my chest as to challenge the boundaries of the T-shirt I have changed into. Hide, Gideon, hide. Push that face into the wall so no one can see.

"You're Puerto Rican and you're Irish," Ralph, the counterman, says to Luis and Jimmy, before turning to me. "But you I don't know. That nose tells me you're Jewish, right?"

"Yeah, but what's his head tell you?" Jimmy cracks up at his own joke.

"So? Are you Jewish or goyim?" Ralph asked.

"I'm not Jewish," I say. I don't want Ralph testing me about what *goyim* means so he can just about say I am stupid, as he practically did the last time, when he was talking about his Ivy League son.

"So what are you?" Ralph shoots back.

"My father's Armenian." Then I quickly add, "But my mother's Swedish."

"Hey, Mr. Kemal, come over here a minute. I want you to meet someone," Ralph has called to Mr. Kemal, who comes over to the counter after finishing a transaction.

"You know what this skinny blond kid here is? He's an Armenian," Ralph says.

Mr. Kemal assesses me with a shrewd smile. "Since when does an Armenian have blond hair?"

"He must get that from his mother," Ralph says. "He says his mother is Swedish."

"In addition, you are too tall to be an Armenian," Mr. Kemal says, as if Ralph

hadn't spoken.

"My father is tall," I say.

"There are no tall Armenians." Mr. Kemal is built low to the ground. He drags on his unfiltered cigarette and draws the smoke up his nose to show the complexity of his ways. "I am Turkish," Mr. Kemal goes on, his emphatic bluntness accompanied by a glint of mischief in his eyes. "Do you know who the Turks are?"

"Sure."

"Then you know that the Turks and the Armenians are good friends. We have many Armenians in our country. Now if you will excuse me." Mr. Kemal goes back to the cash register to take care of business.

"That man was fucking with you," Luis says to me.

"Not at all. He was giving him a history lesson. History is important. And it's all in the eye of the beholder. That's what you need to understand." Ralph goes off down the counter.

"Ralph is a strange motherfucker. That's what I need to understand," Jimmy Riley says.

"Have I not told you before? You're very fortunate to have a father. The Armenians were a persecuted people. They were practically destroyed by the Turks. If it wasn't for a Turkish servant who risked his life when the authorities came to their house to take them away, they would all be dead. The servant had them hide in the basement while he spoke with the Turkish authorities. You must understand that thousands and hundreds of thousands of Armenians died at the hands of the Turks."

“When did this happen?”

“That would have been during World War I,” Momma says.

“How old was Daddy?”

“He was young. Like yourself now. He was just a boy.”

“But what happened after the authorities left? Didn’t they come back?”

“God was looking after your father.”

“But he went to France. How did he get there?”

“God is good. Do you understand that God is good, and that if there is a line in the sand, then he can make another, and if that does not suffice, then still more? Do you understand what I am saying? Do you?”

Once again Vera forces me to see that she has a core of strength I do not possess, resilience that lets her shrug off the shabby conditions in which we live. She is not afraid of those, like Pam Becker, who are above her. She has assets that she can count on. They are there, if untabulated, in her mind.

“When are you going to introduce me to that friend of yours?” she says, as if I had never grabbed a handful of her long silky hair.

“What friend?”

“That tall boy with the curly blond hair I see you with.”

I just smile. It is not for me to tell her that she is not worthy of Tom Smits and that none of them are worthy of Tom Smits. It is not for me to tell her that shame is an enveloping thing.

And yet the next week she can say to me, "Pam's dying to go out with you."

“Come on,” I say. I do not ask my sister if she is crazy, proposing that I go out with Pam Becker, an arty girl from the special realm.

"What do you mean, come on? Call her. Go ahead," Vera says.

And yet, by evening, I am thinking that a girl like Pam could have an interest in me. After all, she is Nancy Becker's younger sister, and Nancy has seen my brother all these years.

But the night had given me a confidence the morning never does. I wake to terror, hardly knowing where to put my face, remembering my call to Pam Becker the previous night. Not only have I betrayed Jane Thayer, but I have also stepped into something way over my head.

"It's nothing to lose sleep over. If you have the stuff to do well, you will. It's really as simple as that. Go out to a movie and have your Friday night fun and take your mind off it." Mr. Arbuckle says in math class. It is Friday. The PSAT is scheduled for the next morning. Mr. Arbuckle is only repeating what he said in my freshman year. How expertly he moves the bit of chalk between his fingers, not dropping it once. How supremely in his life he is.

"I've already seen it once. Olivier is so passionate, so dynamic. So *brooding*. You'll be thrilled. You've read the book, of course?"

Pam Becker says these things as we are leaving her doorman building to see *Wuthering Heights*.

“No. I haven't,” I say, that same feeling of shame coming over me as when she

asked if I had heard of *West Side Story*? As if what? As if I have been exposed as the empty-headed idiot that I am.

“You must. You *must*,” she says, gripping my arm if only for a moment.

On the subway I look down at the white sweat socks I am wearing with my gray wool school pants. I always wear white socks because they make my legs look thicker. You have to be built like Lenny from Long Beach to be able to wear black socks with dress slacks. Luke says there will come a time when I won't be caught dead in white socks. It hasn't happened yet.

That scene on the landing keeps flashing into my mind. Does Pam remember that I tried to drag my sister into the apartment by her hair? Does she see that beneath my pleasant, amiable smile I have become just like my father? How can she not?

"Tell me the truth. Did you and Luke try to throw Vera into the incinerator in your basement one night?"

"It didn't happen." My sister is strange. She makes things up. I laugh. I don't know enough not to.

The movie plays at the Baronet, on Fifty-ninth Street and Third Avenue, across from Bloomingdale's. The theater is new, with soft, upholstered seats and a giant screen. And the film is different from the westerns I usually see in those noisy old theaters on the Upper West Side. It turns my mind to scrambled eggs. Some guy looking intense on the English moors.

Halfway through I place my arm around Pam's shoulder, and am too embarrassed to remove it. The darkness made me do it. In the darkness you are supposed to touch a girl. In the silence that goes with the darkness you are supposed to touch a girl. She is

waiting for your touch.

"Wasn't it wonderful? Wasn't it profound?" she asks afterward.

"It was real good," I say.

"I could see that film again and again and again," Pam Becker says.

Outside her building, I say, "I'm going to meet a friend at a Columbia University fraternity party." The lie just pops out of me.

"What a wonderful, exciting thing to do," she says, with the enthusiasm she displays for everything. "But come up for a cup of tea before you go. My parents are away for the weekend."

The apartment has a stillness to it. Soft lighting. A real sofa. A Johnny Lacy/Edward Macy kind of apartment that leaves me in a state of defeated wonder.

We aren't ten minutes in her kitchen drinking tea when a key turns in the lock and Nancy Becker appears. With her is a bearded man wearing a Columbia T-shirt under a red-and-black checked lumber jacket.

"Gideon, is that you?" Nancy shrieks. Her excess freezes me. I have seen her enough to recognize her, but she is no long lost friend. "Jim's play is being produced. Isn't that thrilling? I came in from Vassar for the weekend just so I could see the rehearsals."

The evening is all wrong somehow. I am seeing Pam Becker on the sly, when I already have a girlfriend. And now I am in the family's kitchen with her and her sister and her sister's new boyfriend when there is the PSAT the next morning.

"How is Luke? Has he written?" Nancy asks.

"A little bit."

"Luke doesn't trust himself to be able to put things on paper." She turns to Jim and says, "We're talking about a high school friend of mine." Jim sits with the thick fingers of each hand interlocked on the table and simply nods.

"I guess I better go," I work up the courage to say.

"Gideon has been invited to a fraternity party at Columbia tonight. Isn't that wonderful?" Pam announces.

"Well no, not exactly," I say.

"But you have been. You told me." She turns her big blue eyes on me.

"Well, sort of," I mumble, ready to flee.

"Say hello to the boys at Delta Epsilon Psi." Jim offers me a wry smile.

At the door Pam says, "It was just a wonderful evening."

Wonderful. Thrilling. What about fantastic? Had she said superb? I reel out of the building and up Riverside Drive. Their words—Pam's, Nancy's, Jim's—burn my ears. I speed up, trying to leave behind the scene of humiliation and every memory attached to it, but then stop at the bridge where Luke had left the pennies. They are still there under the base of the lamp.

"Yea," I say. "Yea. Yea. Yea." I say it all the way uptown, with real or imagined craziness in my voice and face.

The windows of the fraternity house on One Hundred Fourteenth Street are flung open. Inside are women and men with glasses in hand as the loud sound of the Four Seasons pours into the street. Then there are the Chiffons, with "He's So Fine." You could get high just standing there.

Jane would be home now, after an evening with her church group. Funny how

little I have thought of her, and now, when I do, that she should seem kind of dreary in comparison with Pam.

Among the Columbia students are other neighborhood kids. Like weeds among the roses we appear, outsiders whose bad upbringings and lousy prospects show in our dull faces. The free booze and the cachet of the Ivy League have drawn us to this Friday night bash. Among us are Catholic girls the frat boys have rounded up from the local bars, where these girls with names like Maureen and Kathleen and Patty have been drinking, some with fake IDs.

In the kitchen, I pour myself a foamy cup of beer from a big metal keg, drink it fast, and then pour another. I follow with a cup of scotch and club soda. It burns going down. I quickly followed with a refill, afraid that the liquor will be gone before I have had enough. The alcohol coursing through my system and the music pounding in my ears summon a painful desire for achievement, recognition, stardom, something.

"Are you here at the college? You look a little young," a tall, thin girl with her blond hair in a ponytail says over the music.

"No. But maybe someday. I'm a basketball player. I think I can win a scholarship to Princeton, or some school like..."

A bull-necked man in a pale blue Columbia football jersey places a powerful forearm around the girl and moves her away.

I push my way out onto the street. Though it is only on the next block, the building seems far away. A feeling of wooziness has begun to come over me.

"How the hell are you, Gideon?"

Chuck is on duty, sitting in a far corner of the lobby with his legs spread and a

bottle of wine at his side. His boozy, mean voice booms across the big space.

"Fine," I say, desperate to speed past.

"You're fine, huh? You're always fine. Come over here, for Christ's sake."

I leaned against the large antique table, a thick slab of glass protecting the surface.

Behind the table a large porcelain vase stuffed with rhododendron leaves rest on the marble ledge of the big chicken-wire window looking out on a small yard.

"So what grade are you in?"

"Eleventh grade." The wooziness is increasing.

"You good in math?" His voice sounds like a drill.

"Not really. I'm all right."

"I was taking calculus when I was your age. A whiz is what I was. I'd be a professor of mathematics right now if the head of the department hadn't taken a dislike to me and cheated me out of my doctorate." He stops and stares at me in a penetrating way. "You been out drinking? Jesus. You're drunk. I can see it," Chuck says, as I move toward the stairs. "I hope you throw up your fucking heart, you wiseass punk."

I wake the next morning to sunlight pouring through the window. My mouth is all dry. Above me are slats supporting a mattress. It takes a minute for me to realize I am in Luke's bottom bunk and still in my clothes. The room smells of vomit. I remember the walls spinning around and around and putting my foot on the floor to stop the motion and praying for the sick feeling to stop and then the endless vomiting.

The alarm clock says 10:35 am. The PSAT is well underway at the Claremont School. I sit up. My head. It hurts so bad. I hold it in my hands. And that dried vomit.

"The spelling part of the test was really tough, Gideon. That word *diphtheria* was a real killer, wasn't it?" Diane shouts, her words carrying over the din in the school cafeteria, as I pass the table where she sits with John Edel and Bert Bach and Mr. Arbuckle. I turn and show her my smile. I want her to see that her words have no effect on me, that her knife has missed my heart.

But Diane Coleman has not missed my heart. She knows her way to it. I am but a thing of transparency for her to play with. I sit alone with my back to her table, her allusion bringing into current time, as if years have not passed, Miss Flowers's spelling bees, which featured words such as *diphtheria*, and in which I excelled. She is saying that simple things like spelling bees I can show up for while shunning rigorous exams like the PSAT. She is obliquely saying I am a coward, and not merely a coward but a stupid coward.

That afternoon Mlle. Gallimard stands over my desk in French class, her puffy, rouged cheeks quivering. She has asked a question I do not understand.

"Vous n'etudiez pas, Gideon?"

"Non."

"Vous n'etes pas le meme etudiant. Quel dommage."

When I do not reply, she turns away in disgust. Diane answers her question promptly. Diane, who reads *Paris Match* and Camus in French. I stare, unsmiling, in my back row seat, as she basks in the glow of Mlle. Gallimard's approval.

That Friday, as always, school lets out at noon and I ride home on the Fifth Avenue bus, change out of my school clothes, and have a Chock Full O' Nuts lunch—clam chowder

soup and a tuna fish sandwich and an orange drink and blueberry cream pie. When I walk out, I can almost feel substantial in its pitiless mirrors.

As I approach Scully's stoop, Jimmy Riley is coming toward me. He does not have the laughing thing on his pale, freckled face. "Did you hear? They shot Kennedy," he says, and heads off before I can think to reply.

Death. Whole minutes slip away with my mind on something else, and then return to the fact. A great weight of grayness it feels like.

Because her church social has been canceled, Jane and I head down to the Riviera Theater on Ninety-sixth Street and Broadway. Scully and Luis and Jimmy are there too, all of us sitting up in the balcony. And though the men who stand over the urinals too long are there in the bathroom, I do not bother with them on this night, feeling no overwhelming urge to dawdle.

Jackie Maltor, from the Claremont School, is at the movie theater, too. He lives down on Riverside Drive at One Hundred Fifteenth Street, and we see each other in the neighborhood now and then. Jackie doesn't scare me in the way that Tom Smits does. It does not bother my mind that Jackie sees me with my friends on this night. He just has no social status that I need to be afraid of, having a sister such as he does who has fallen and fallen in spite of her beauty. Besides, he is as much an outsider at that school as I am. And remembering the rumor going around the school that Jackie conveyed to me that I am truly a Negro back in ninth grade and the way he had of covering his mouth when he laughed to hide his prominent gums or to keep others from smelling his bad breath has made me not like him very much.

Jackie is not alone but with his cousin from Alabama, a tall, lanky guy named

Eustis wearing a sleeveless black T-shirt, jeans with a studded black garrison belt buckled on the side, and stomp boots. On his forearm is a large tattoo of a bowie knife.

"I'm glad someone found a way to shoot the mother. We've been wanting him done for for some time where I come from. He was a nigger-loving mother, and I'm only sorry it wasn't me who pulled the trigger." Jackie Maltor's cousin says these things at the refreshment stand, where I stand with Jimmy Riley waiting to get popcorn and soda.

"Damn, man, you should get some toilet paper and wipe your mouth after shitting out of it," Jimmy says, and takes off before Jackie's cousin can grab him.

I can't tell if Jackie's cousin is serious with his lack of respect or just pretending to be obnoxious. I feel frightened for Eustis. I see him getting whaled on in New York City if he doesn't change his words and get out of those clothes. I feel sorry for and protective of him. Eustis just may be a big country stupid who thinks that dressing tough is being tough. Eustis may not know that there are types in New York with no play in them, people who hurt you to the point of finality whether you are in tough clothes or not.

Outside, right there, under the marquee, Jimmy shouts, "Hey, shitmouth, how you doing?" to Jackie's cousin, standing only a few feet away. Eustis pulls off his garrison belt and says, "If there's anything I like more than fucking, it's to bash poor northern white trash. Come here, Twiggy, and let me hurt you beyond your heart's desire."

"Hurt me, motherfucker. Hurt me," Luis said, taking off his coat and tossing it to Jimmy.

"This is too good for a Spic," Eustis says, handing the garrison belt to Jackie before moving in on Luis, who pops him on the jaw and steps back and then to the side and hits him with another right to the face. The Southerner throws these looping

punches, while Luis, applying fancy footwork, calmly tattoos his face with solid jabs. Soon the Southerner is bleeding from the mouth and nose and his right eye is closing and his movements are slower. Luis hits him one final shot that sends him backward into a parked car, where he slowly slides down to the sidewalk.

In the dark that night, John Kennedy's face grows bigger and bigger. I want to take it into sleep with me, but the Mexicans, with their knives, are waiting instead.

Momma says, "The Lord is upon the land." My father says, "Someone has been made to get up." Momma then says, "Those poor little children. And his poor wife."

Jackie Maltor has invited me to his apartment after basketball practice. His parents are away for a few days, he says. I am afraid his redneck cousin will be lurking, but Jackie assures me Eustis has gone back to Alabama, taking along a black eye and fat lip and a deep hatred of Puerto Ricans to add to his long list of prejudices.

For the first time I am in the apartment of a Claremont student, on the tenth floor of one of those tall Riverside Drive buildings with a doorman and a huge marble lobby and an atmosphere of resounding tranquility, as if each spacious, well-appointed apartment houses a family blessed with bounteous success. And on entering, it is for me to be in memory mode, having been here with Jerry in the long ago for trick or treating but also for shenanigans, having overturned a fire extinguisher on one of the landings and fled down the back stairs as foam spurted from the nozzle. It is not for me to tell Jackie Maltor such a thing, nor to try to justify related acts of vandalism. All I know is that such things are not a part of who I am this day.

The invitation warms me toward Jackie Maltor, who might be handsome, even beautiful, were it not for those crooked and prominent front teeth. Jackie has not gotten the wire, as so many of the Claremont students do. Dental and facial correction are big at the Claremont School—buck teeth get straightened and big noses are made smaller.

And then he goes and says what he does and all my good feeling vanishes.

"I head out to Long Island just about every weekend with a friend of mine and make it with a different girl each time. My friend has a car. He screws his girl in the front seat and I screw mine in the back seat," Jackie says, offering that peculiar laugh of his, with his hand over his mouth.

I know nothing about that region of the state, except that it appears on the map as some narrow appendage. The Long Island Railroad. That I know from my journeys through Penn Station. A commuter railroad, not a real railroad. Nothing like the Pennsylvania Railroad, which crosses state borders. And yet I do know something about Long Island. I know it as an emotionally cold region where no happiness is to be found. And I know too that so much of my life is like that, imagining things beyond my direct knowledge as uninviting, as if only the path I have already traveled can provide me with warmth.

So sad am I now feeling after hearing Jackie Maltor's sexual exploits. I can't help imagining Jane among those girls he and his friend have their way with, just screwing her and then tossing her off to the side of the road, where she is left to cry and cry.

Books dominate the apartment. The floor to ceiling shelves are packed with them, and they cover the coffee table. Jackie Maltor's father owns two bookstores up on Broadway. The main store supplies Columbia University students with their textbooks,

while the other store is smaller and sleepier, its shelves and racks filled with used books, many of them paperbacks.

"A little vermouth. A little vodka," Jackie Maltor says, having gone to the bar, where he pours alcohol from colorful bottles into a mixing glass, before transferring the concoction into a stemmed glass.

"I drink these all the time," he says, handing me the glass.

The drink tastes sweet and goes down easily. It even has an olive, which tastes great.

"Let me refresh your glass," Jackie says, laughing as he heads back to the bar.

A feeling of euphoria comes over me, as if the sun has burned away the gray clouds. The second drink goes down easily as well, and I hand Jackie my glass for a third.

But then the sun is gone, and there is dizziness like nothing I have ever known as I stagger into the bathroom and a spray of vomit flies from my mouth. I find comfort on the cool tiles. How long I lie there I don't know. Jackie Maltor shakes me awake.

"Oh Jesus, take the back stairs, not the elevator. You stink," Jackie Maltor says, his laughter a constant. And so I descend one flight after another on unsteady legs.

The streetlights are now on along Riverside Drive, the darkness offering partial cover for my vomit-stained shirt. As I climb the hill toward my building, I think of homework undone and of Jane but mostly of the bed that will soon be mine to lie down on.

But I fall down again outside my building, the pavement becoming my bed.

"Is he going to be all right?" I hear Mrs. Greene say.

"He's just piss-eyed drunk. That's all it is. He does this all the time. He just has

to learn how to handle the stuff," Like Mrs. Greene, Chuck seems miles away.

"Oh dear," Mrs. Greene said.

"Don't worry. We'll take care of him. He's my brother. We'll give him all the love and attention he could ever want." That would be my sister Naomi.

"Come on. Get the hell up, and stop disgracing the goddamn family," Chuck says, pulling me to my feet.

“Must my son be bad before he can be good? Must he go down before he can go up? Must he search before he finds? Have I not told you about my father, my son? Have I not told you that my mother would send me out into the snow to find him and to smash the bottle against the rocks? Have you not read in the book of Proverbs that wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging?”

I lie facing the wall in Luke's bunk, and stay in that position until she goes away.

The first league game is against Thoreau, a school with a similarly small enrollment as Claremont. The team relies on a 6'4" forward, a ringer from a school with a stronger basketball program that he was expelled from. The boy, if he is one, has a powerful physique and blows past us for savage dunk shots that leave the wooden backboard trembling. Other times he guns from twenty-five feet out. From near and from far he fills the hole for fifty-seven points, doing his destruction while wearing a fixed, cool expression.

Mr. Arbuckle's fretting ways from the bench are a bother, but seeing Mr. Sadowski leave the locker room quickly and without a word after the debacle is what

concerns me.

In the next game a runt wearing floppy socks and baggy shorts scores forty-five points as Abel Academy routs Claremont for a second league loss in a row, and the season seems lost. The kid throws in fifteen- and twenty-foot left-handed jumpers from on a hard, disdainful, no-arc line, and the hoop just suctions them home.

"I can't understand it. That team was shorter than us, had fewer players, had a cross-eyed forward, a center who couldn't jump, was even uglier than us, and still beat us. Unbelievable," Tom says, in the locker room afterward.

If I am bothered that the team has started out so bad, the disappointment is softened by the twenty-nine and thirty-four points I have scored. In fact I soar, listening to Cousin "me-a-serry me-a-sorry" Brucie on WABC at night, imagining my name being roared in huge college gyms across the country. I am aware, to my shame, that I have a I-gots-mines-you-gots-to-get-your-owns thing going.

But then Claremont turns it around. We win our next three, and against good teams, and Mr. Sadowski doesn't bolt the locker room without a word. But Tom has dominated the offense and pulled down more rebounds. I don't know how to arrange my face so my distress doesn't show.

One afternoon it happens, as it has to. It was what I deserve for not holding in my mind the possibility of it happening in the first place. During the scrimmage there comes a shout from the balcony. "Yo, look who the fuck is here, guys. It's my man Gideon."

Staring down are Luis, Scully, Kevin, and Jimmy Riley. All I have on are a pair of sneakers and sweat socks and a pair of shorts.

"What a funny-looking basketball team," Jimmy gasps, in his Jimmy Riley way, falling all over the balcony.

"Are they friends of yours?" Mr. Sadowski has turned to me.

"I sort of know them." I can feel the other Claremont kids looking at me in a new way.

"Hey Muscles, Jane know you look like that under your clothes?" I don't need to lift my eyes to identify Scully's voice.

"Get out of here," Mr. Sadowski roars.

"Get your momma out of here," Jimmy shouts, the last of them to split through the balcony exit.

"Gideon's gang. We've finally gotten a look at Gideon's gang," Lance says afterward, in the locker room.

"Boy, where did you say you live?" Freddy Snyder asks me, in his astonished way.

"One Hundred Tenth Street off Broadway," I say, unable to remember what I have told him before.

"Gideon's the only person I know who has a different address every time you ask him," Tom shouted, from the next row of lockers.

"Who was that girl they mentioned? You don't really have a girlfriend, do you? Somehow I can't imagine you with girls," Freddy continues.

"Leave Gideon alone. You saw his gang. He really will get them after you," Lance says, coming to my rescue once again.

"Gideon with a girl." Five-foot six-inch Frank, with the beaked nose and the

thick glasses, shakes his head in wonderment.

I think of staying away after their drop-in visit at the gym, but my feet take me back to Scully's stoop that Friday night. I have to get what is coming to me.

"Damn, now I know why you've been afraid to take your shirt off," Luis said.

"You shouldn't go saying things like that to Gideon," Kevin says.

"Man, you're all bones," Luis says. "What's the matter? You don't eat or something?"

"Jane digs him for his he-man chest," Scully says.

"Where is Jane?" Kevin asked, in a kinder voice.

"She has a Friday night social thing up at her church," I say.

Though it is a cool, late-fall night, we pool our money for quarts of beer, which we pour into paper cups. After several cups the burn of Luis's and Scully's words are still there, but at least I am not near tears. And after several more my mind goes elsewhere, to do not sting quite so much. And after several more my mind turns to other Ivy League schools. There is Dartmouth. I like their green-and-white colors but there is a lot of snow up there in Hanover, New Hampshire, and pretty far from New York and Jane. There is Cornell. Their team wears red and white, and the school is pretty good, but not really the best, like Harvard or Yale. I probably can't get into either of those two, but maybe Princeton would have a place for me. It isn't all that far away. I could zip over the George Washington Bridge and see Jane a lot. And the Princeton Tigers wear those great black and orange uniforms and are always trouncing the Columbia Lions. And there is Brown, in Rhode Island. Surely their basketball team wears brown. And Penn. Aren't

they red and blue?

But Luis is telling a story, and the emotion he invests pulls me in.

"The principal, he was going to call my parents because I had been fighting with this chump. I went down on my knees to Brother McNeese in his office and said, 'Puh-leese don't call my father because he'll kill me. Puh-leese.' He could see I was trembling and he let me slide. Because my father, man, he don't play."

I am almost weepy listening to Luis's story. Luis, powerful as he is, has someone who can put fear in him and to whom he can defer. The same feeling came over me when Sean had to submit to the nurses and doctors in the hospital. It makes me happy for Luis that he has a father who means so much to him. What a wonderful thing for Luis to have, even if it probably makes him a little stupid, too. Because fathers have a way of making you stupid, I think, as I drink.

"Fucking Gideon. You drink all the fucking beer again? What the fuck is with you, man?" Oh, it is just Luis, talking his talk, after finishing his story.

"I had some," I say.

"Some? Damn. You just about drank it all," he goes on. He can be that way sometimes.

As they head toward the exit, there is Jim, Nancy Becker's date those weeks ago, climbing the stairs. Our eyes lock before I can look away. He gives a smile of recognition.

"What you smiling at, chump?" Luis demands.

"Your fraternity brothers?" Jim says.

"You know this chump?" Luis demands of me.

"Sort of," I say. The fear of violence is in my stomach and his knees. The fear is all over and only begins to ease as Jim walks off.

"Damn. You know some fucked-up people," Luis says. "I was about to cave in the motherfucker's chest. What's that shit about fraternity brothers?"

"Just some joke. He was teasing me, not you," I say.

"Best not be teasing me. I'll put out his fucking lights."

Yes, yes. Cave in their chests. Put out their lights. Do whatever you want, I think, as I head home past the blaze of lights along frat house row.

Mrs. Jacoby is like a cartoon character with her overbite and big puppy dog eyes. She speaks in a raspy voice, covering European history from the Middle Ages to the Napoleonic wars with enthusiasm, but we have come to see that her real passion, beyond the Edict of Nantes or Cromwell, seems to be hope, specifically in regard to college. "All I mean to say to you is that you don't have to enroll directly in an Ivy League college. My high school grades were only so-so. I wasn't ready to go away to some prestigious college right out of high school, emotionally or academically. And so I spent my freshman year at Brooklyn College, where I earned straight A's, and that was my ticket to Wellesley. The point I am trying to make is never give up—never."

Our history teacher has brought sadness to the room. Or maybe it is embarrassment. Or maybe both have spread within these walls. All I hear is Mrs. Jacoby trying to convince herself more than us of her own worthiness.

But there is more going on with Mrs. Jacoby than personal narrative. She has assigned each student a topic that requires outside reading. The student then is to present

his or her topic to the class. Every week a different student takes his or her turn at Mrs. Jacoby's desk, not merely giving the report but fielding questions from the class. Bert Bach has discussed the causes of the French Revolution. Ogden Connifer reported on a biography of Martin Luther. Diane Coleman had much to say about Joan of Arc. And now I have been assigned a lengthy biography of Henry VIII, but I cannot see myself leading the class in any kind of discussion and have my classmates laugh at my thin mind and thin body and tell me of my flat head with their smirks and giggly whispering.

The due day for the report rushes toward me. All I can do is step off the tracks so the train Mrs. Jacoby set in motion does not destroy me.

"Can you tell me why you did not show up for class with your presentation?" she asks, the following day.

"I was feeling sick."

"Is that all it is? You were feeling sick?"

"That's all."

"There's nothing more?"

"No," I say. Her show of personal interest only feeds my self-pity. I feel a mad destructiveness taking hold. Let the wrecking ball come in and demolish my high school career.

"I'll tell you what. I'm going to give you a month's extension. How's that?" Mrs. Jacoby says.

Extension? I am not seeking an F, but I don't want the assignment hanging over me anymore either. I want my dream to die right away or not at all.

"Sure," I say.

The day that the PSAT results arrive, my ears are pricked for numbers. I hear the numbers 70 and 72 and 73 for Bert Bach and John Edel and Ogden Connifer. I hear the number 68 for Diane Coleman, who is ready for me in the cafeteria during lunch. "Mrs. Jacoby gives real tough spelling bees, doesn't she, Gideon?" her whole table erupting in laughter.

"Yeah, Gideon, spell *paramecium* for us," Freddy Snyder shouts. There is another shower of laughter, and others follow.

"Give us *chloroplast*."

"How about *protozoa*?"

"*Mitochondria*."

"*Meiosis*."

"*Mitosis*."

"Here's a real hard one. *Halitosis*."

The PSAT. The dropped biology class. And now my failure to stand before them in Mrs. Jacoby's history class. I smile my way free of the cafeteria and take refuge in a bathroom stall, where I place my forehead against the wall, feeling the coolness of the tiles.

During English class, I stare at Sheila Lichten, a girl with a bad case of acne and a look of defeat on her pie-shaped face. She suddenly dropped out in the middle of ninth grade but returned the following year. There was talk that she had mental problems. Others said she had gotten pregnant. The scorn others showed her was inevitable, I understood; such punishment had to be the penalty for falling behind and showing your

weakness. There is some punitive core from which such attacks flow. Sensing my attention, she turns and offers me a tentative smile. I look away, unwilling to openly join her in the loser's circle.

"So how did you do?" Tom asks, finding me toward the end of the day.

"What do you mean?"

"The PSAT. That's what I mean."

"I didn't take the test."

"You didn't take it?"

"I was sick."

"You know you have the SAT coming up."

"I know."

"Are you prepared?"

"Sure, I'm prepared."

"Have you taken any of those practice exams?"

"Practice exams? Sure. Lots of them. Every day. And on the weekend too."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm all right. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm all right," Tom says.

A thin blanket of snow has settled on the pathways and lawns of the university campus.

As we walk along, Jane hums "Silent Night." Maybe her choir group is practicing Christmas carols. I do not know and I do not ask. To my ears, her sound is hostile and pompous, the proof being that stupidly self-important and earnest look her face can

assume, as if she is some great vocalist. She is also trailing just a step behind so as to purposely annoy and frustrate me.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” I say. She has left me no choice but to launch another investigation.

“What’s your problem, mister?” She has learned well to be alert to the warning signs.

"Who is it you're after now? Philip again?"

“That’s right. I want Philip. I want Scully too. And Kevin and even Sean. I want them all,” Jane says, a terrible fire coming from her mouth.

Just like the year before, I slap her, only it is a hard one that turns her head. Her cheek against my hand feels good. I hit her again. Some kind of flesh frenzy is going on. She reacts with a gob of spit to my face.

Such a warm glow coming from the lights in Butler Library, I think, as she goes off, and wipe the spit from my cheek. I am going to get it good now. Real good. A posse of the righteous riding hard to give me the beating that I deserve for hitting a girl, *a girl*. Standing right there at the scene of the crime I seek to disappear within myself, so when the posse arrives, a stranger can say to them, “He went thataway.”

Since the fall a man named Henry has been coming around, a tall Negro with pomade in his hair and a Howdy Doody smile and a big gap where his front teeth should be.

“How old are you, man?” Jimmy Riley goes.

“How old do you want me to be?” Henry goes.

“What kind of answer is that?”

“Same kind of answer as your question.”

“What’s that on your face?” Jimmy goes, noting the abscess that has formed on Henry’s right cheek.

“I’ll tell you if you let me see what’s on your cheeks.”

“I didn’t say *cheeks*. I said *cheek*.”

“You mean you want to show me one without the other.”

“Damn, Sam.”

“Henry’s the name,” Henry goes, telling us, with his manner and his speech, that he exists in a realm where our attitudes and our questions cannot reach—telling us what it means to be this particular Negro man in this time.

Henry is going with a freckle-faced white girl named Louise from the projects down on One Hundred Third and Amsterdam. She is seventeen and plain and afflicted with a sad expression. No one, not even Philip, attaches the word *skank* or any other such name to her, so strong is the power of her sadness.

Louise has a brother, Donnie, and if she can exist only in shadow, he is the sun itself. Radiantly blond and beautiful, and filling his clothes so well, he makes you want to go out and buy the same jeans and flannel shirt in the hope that you will look just like him if you do. Donnie is going steady with a girl named Maria, from down on One Hundred Eleventh Street. She wears his blue varsity jacket with “Stuyvesant” in white lettering on the back, the name signifying the kind of mind he has that he can go to this elite public high school. She is petite yet big-breasted, with bowl-cut hair that shines its blackness, and big eyes that see right through to your heart’s desire and note the level of excitement her presence has brought you to.

Mention Donnie's name and Henry rolls his eyes and smiles like the cat that has eaten the canary. "Yum! Yum!" is what he says, going so far as to lick his full lips. And maybe the fact that he doesn't say the same about Louise says it all. Or maybe nothing says it all about the boys and more than boys who congregate on Scully's stoop and do the ordinary things we do on the streets of New York City on the Upper West Side of Manhattan in the early 1960s.

I want to say that my life is a spiral, but that suggests I return to a place on higher ground, and where is the higher ground when Mrs. Thayer says to me, her voice as velvety as ever, "Your darling's return is imminent. Yes, of course, I hear the urgency in your voice, your young passion. You can be sure I will be your faithful messenger"? Or when Mr. Thayer, in a voice less mellifluous, retires the appellation "old sport" for "old buddy," as in "No more calls tonight, old buddy. No more calls tonight," before slamming down the receiver?

And though the ferocity of the rejection expels me from the phone booth, an hour later I am back again, having reassessed the situation. But the line is busy, and stays busy. The Thayers are learning how to deal with the likes of me.

"Why you in that phone booth so much?" Lev asked. "You have so much the important business?"

"Yes. The important business," I say.

"Sleep. Sleep is the important business," Lev says. "And food."

The school day drags by. My classmates are monsters of good purpose, shooting up their

hands so they can shine in the teacher's eye. When the final bell sounds, I flee back uptown. Holiday lights have appeared in store windows and Christmas trees are lined up on the streets, young men in heavy coats and watchman's caps eager to sell, and in the store windows holiday lights burn brightly.

That afternoon I sit on the rim of one of the two fountains on the esplanade above the Columbia mall. Two men hurry past bronze Alma Mater, her arms upraised and a book in her lap. As they come near, I hear them laughing—hard, intelligent male laughter, as cold as the wind that flaps the flags of the university and the United States on the two flagpoles.

There she is. Jane. On the mall, wearing her green parka. Yes, it is her, down to her pigeon-toed walk. And not alone either. The blond boy, Donnie, glorious in his varsity jacket, is walking with his arm around her. And there I am, with my face rearranged into an I-don't-really-care expression just in case they should turn and see me.

That night, in the dark, while lying down, I listen to my breath. I hear it go in and I hear it go out. Oh, there are other sounds as well: the vehicular rhythm of Broadway, with its cars and trucks and buses, and the bits of conversation that float up from the street. But it is my breath I really hear and seek to stay within for the space it provides from that other world. And then, no, no, all over again here is Jane, and here is Donnie, and here is the cold wind rushing in, and I cry, "Help me, just help me," not knowing what to do. And then here is Momma, with the sleeping pill, and her words of comfort, saying "Lie perfectly still so it can take effect." And oh, the mercy that the tiny yellow capsule shows, and the happiness it brings.

"Donnie broke up with his old lady. She be going with some other guy, so he don't have an old lady. Jane and him be making eyes at each other when you're not around, so now he got your old lady. Are you going to be a man and kill him, or are you just an old pussy? That's the question." Jimmy Riley does his crazy laugh in the presence of Scully and Kevin and Luis.

"Yeah, here's what you do. Whip off your shirt and show him your manly chest. That should scare him off," Luis goes.

I retreat into Funelli's grocery, where on the radio Frank Sinatra is singing "The Wee Small Hours of the Morning."

"So what do you think about your old flame going out with the gorgeous one? Did my man think he'd be her only one? I hear he's got a cock you wouldn't believe."

"What's been going on?" I say, as if Sean has been talking about the Mets. The bout with hepatitis has not changed him in any way that I can see.

"I've been betting and winning. Winning big, too, my man."

"That's good," I say.

"You don't know how sick and feeble you look, champ. And you thought you were such hot shit bopping around with your girlfriend."

Hot shit. The words settle in my mind, like a neon sign. It is just the way some people speak, I tell myself, heading back down toward Broadway. But when I look for words to counteract them, they are not there. Then Momma comes, and because it is Christmas, she takes my face in her hands and says, "You must remember who the Lord is and why he appeared on this earth. You must witness to this marvel. You must have conviction burning in your soul. Now have some chicken, my son. Have some chicken."

The snow is falling heavily. The big, wet flakes accumulate. Already pools of slush have formed where sidewalks meet the street. The cold water seeping through the canvas and the air holes of my sneakers saturate my socks and shock my feet as I trudge up Broadway. My hand goes to the small square package in the pocket of his parka. I touch it lightly, fearful of messing up the gift wrapping and the neatly tied bow.

Just before closing I rushed into Tillman's ,on One Hundred Tenth Street and bought a silver-plated bracelet. A ray of happiness spread through me as I paid the saleslady and heard Nat King Cole sing about chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

At One Hundred Twenty-Second Street, feeling the quiet of the gothic buildings of Union Theological Seminary just behind me, I pause to watch a northbound subway roar from the tunnel, one car after another rolling free of the soot-darkened masonry walls and onto the el. As if it were a talisman, I again lightly touch the small box before proceeding east up the hill to its peak, then allow downhill momentum to lead me on even as a voice within is saying no, no, no.

Outside Jane's building I begin my vigil, staring at the colored lights blinking on and off in the ground-floor window of an apartment across the street. A police car climbs the hill, the chains on its tires clicking on the cobblestones. An old couple, walking arm in arm, make their way slowly up the steps, and brush the snow from each other's coats before entering. Soon after, two screaming boys run out, banging the door behind them. Snowballs they pack in their small hands and hurl at each other as they head further down the hill toward Amsterdam Avenue.

A half-hour passes. My nose runs steadily, exhausting my supply of tissues.

"What are you doing here?"

She stands looking down at me from the top of the stoop, her voice loud and stern, her hands in the pockets of her parka. It is an I'm-not-afraid-if-people-hear-me voice.

"I wanted to give you this," I say, pulling the box from my pocket. My words sound nothing like those I have rehearsed, fear taking all the life out of them.

"Look, Gideon, I don't want a Christmas present from you. How about just going away? That would be a great Christmas present to me." Her words are spoken with unrelenting force and anger.

I stand there, paralyzed by her vehement rejection.

"You are just a selfish bastard who would give me a gift to make me feel guilty and for no other reason. Now get lost. I've got to go around the corner to the store and you'd better be gone when I get back." She points a finger at me.

I know now that she is putting on a show for others to see and hear. My attention is drawn to her churning mouth. Blistering soreness has melted away any holiday cheer. I reach out and slap her, wanting to stop her ugly words, her ugly mouth.

"Bastard. Fucking bastard. I'm going to get my father. He'll kill you," she screams.

Her father? Her father? Back up the hill I go, passing a chorus of seminarians spreading yuletide cheer with "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

Donnie has organized a football game—not touch football but tackle, the kind that requires shoulder pads and helmets. There are reasons, beyond the roughness of the game—the image of a defensive player throwing himself at the churning legs of a running

back comes to mind—to stay away from the playing field in Riverside Park on a cold, clear Saturday morning in January, given that where Donnie goes, Jane is sure to follow. But as the only alternative is my own solitude, the park calls me deeper and deeper into it. From the top of a set of stairs, I take in the scene below. Like a powerful young god preparing for battle, his helmet held against his side, Donnie stands amid the ragtag gathering in tight white football pants that stop at his calves and a worn red jersey. Shoulder pads that contour his body beautifully and a pair of black cleats for traction on the snow-covered field complete the regalia.

All along I have had in mind to somewhere apply the brake, my goal being to come near yet remain far. But after several minutes, I find myself headed down the stairs, the field calling me to its level. And now even the sidelines won't suffice, my need to belong even stronger than I had gauged. Under the batting cage I soon stand, joining the pool of kids from which the two teams are being chosen.

Among the last picked, I look out from the huddle. There, on the cinder running track, is Jane with her girlfriend Frieda, the two of them staring out at the field. My confidence has suddenly returned. I can beat my man. I'm sure of it, I say to our quarterback. The huddle breaks and, yes, I run a fifteen-foot button hook, catching the ball chest high. The goal line is mine to cross when Donnie submarines me. High over his padded shoulder I fly before belly-flopping on to a mound of hard snow inches from the end zone. The wind driven from me, my mouth a rictus of pain, I rise to my knees, as I watch Donnie do a triumphant twirl. It feels like nothing I have experienced before.

"You all right, man?" Jimmy Riley asks, kneeling at my side.

It seems like several minutes before I can answer.

"My hero," Jane says, as I struggle off the field, my arms wrapped around my abdomen.

The world seems a long way off as I lie in bed for the rest of the day. I have lost. I have gone where I did not belong, but it is no big deal. If others are blessed with toughness I don't possess, then so be it. The bed feels soft and warm. It is a nice place to be, better than the cold, hard world. My breath has returned. That is the important thing. I have that for company.

The man sits reading at a desk outside the door to the auxiliary gym to ensure only university students enter. But he doesn't turn me away. Some wordless communication compels me to put aside my basketball plans as students in shorts and T-shirts come and go, the boom of basketballs on the hardwood court echoing out into the hall.

"That's a big book," I say, about the fat Penguin copy of *David Copperfield* on his desk.

"I have three days to read all of it," the man says.

"Three days? We spent weeks, months, reading *Oliver Twist* and *A Tale of Two Cities* back in seventh grade."

"These are the things that are expected of graduate students here," the man says, guiding his black frame glasses back up his nose with his index finger. He speaks in a murmuring and earnest voice, his words the patter of nothingness next to what he is really saying.

I follow him into the stairwell, where we do not need to stay long. Afterward, he writes out his name and phone number on a matchbook cover. Quentin, he calls himself.

I visit him several times at his studio apartment. He is a large man but he is not rough. He does nothing violent.

Because Jane Thayer is not lost to my mind, I ask Quentin to go to a movie with me on a Saturday night. It is my guess that Jane will be at the theater with Donnie and everyone from Scully's stoop. I want to be seen in the company of this older man. I want Jane and the rest of them to know I have connections that make me important in the world and dimensions that make me intriguing as well.

With these considerations in mind, I position Quentin and myself on the aisle several rows below Jane and Donnie so we will be in their line of vision and maybe even be a rival with *Irma La Douce* for Jane's interest. But when I look back her way, hoping for some show of curiosity if not distress in her face, all I see is Donnie smooching her.

Following the coming attractions and before the feature can begin, Jimmy Riley starts up. "Yo, Gideon, who's that man you're sitting with? The two of you look *strange* together." Quentin shows no sign of agitation. He just slides his glasses back up his nose and draws on his Pall Mall.

I head for the men's room a few minutes later but instead leave the movie theater, turn up Broadway, then down a side street to West End Avenue. I do not stay to a predictable course. There are doorways to duck into and trees and parked cars to hide behind. It is a concern of mine that Quentin might be following behind, with the question "Why?" written all over his big face. It is enough that I have to hear the question all through the night. It is not reasonable that I should have to see it, too.

Scully throws a party that January, his parents and sister having gone to stay with

relatives in the Bronx. The kids on Scully's stoop do not have parties. We just hang around the stoop or sit up in Columbia University or in the park. But Scully is trying something new, and I have to look at him a different way, as if he has a dimension I myself do not possess that moves him past where I am.

Scully has invited the O'Donnell sisters, Mary Marie and Cathy Cathleen, from One Hundred Eleventh Street between Broadway and Amsterdam. And Luis comes, and Jimmy Riley, and Rob Koley and Kevin, too. And Philip shows up, with Mary Ellen Fitzkelly, another neighborhood girl. But Sean is not to be seen. No, no. He is out there doing his mystery stuff, robbing the Catholic Church or whatever. He has no time or inclination for a party like the one that Scully is throwing.

"Hey, man, you sure live in a shit hole," Philip says, after getting some whiskey in him. You can see Philip's words are like a slap to Scully's face the way they bring him to attention.

"Your moms," Scully says, feebly. He does not want any more acid from Philip, who has not learned anything in the time since Sean busted him in his mouth so Philip had to run home with his hand over it.

The beer and the scotch and Frankie Valli singing "Big Girls Don't Cry" turn on my lights. Now I'm staring at Mary Marie. She isn't Jane, but I'm seeing possibilities. And she's smiling at me, a nice open smile, even if it reveals too much of her gums.

Scully moves in on Mary Marie before I can approach. He seems to know how to take the lead in a slow dance without getting his feet all tangled up with Mary Marie's, who looks dreamy-eyed in his arms. And then I begin to think that some mathematics must be involved and how you have to apply logic within a three-dimensional space for

the smooth operation that Scully is performing.

And now it is Ben E. King and the Drifters singing “Save the Last Dance for Me,” but Marie has gone on to dance with Luis. When the time comes for her to rest her tired feet, I say, “You are the best, the very best,” words that are the product of my intoxication and that I don’t remember having spoken before.

“Well, that is sweet of you to say, but I don’t really think so,” Mary Marie says.

“No, it is true, Mary Marie. May I walk you home?”

“I, well, I will be going home with my sister,” Mary Marie says.

“I could walk with the two of you.”

“Thank you, but no,” she says, her geniality having fled. It is only an awkward minute before Scully comes to claim her once again.

I use the banister to steady myself as I make my way down the steep stairs to the sound of the Drifters singing “Up on the Roof.” On the street I offer nonsense syllables to the darkness, sudden eruptions of sound as an anesthetizing antidote for the humiliation I am feeling. I wonder, not for the first time, about the bonding element of their Catholicism, and why it has the cold feel of the air on my face and in my bones as my building comes into sight.

The black watchman's cap pulled tight over my brother’s head makes him look older. His stubbled face is that of a gargoyle with bloodshot eyes. And he smells bad, I notice, when he reaches me at the bottom of the ramp, and we hug.

“Good luck, Luke,” some guy calls to him before getting into a waiting car.

“That’s Rolfe and those are his parents. He's been studying philosophy at some

German university. He's really smart. I drank Heineken's with him all the way across the Atlantic. Dirt cheap, so why not? You know what I mean?" Luke asks.

"Sure," I say.

He had rented a motorbike, as he said he would, and drove up to Nice, where he visited with my father's sisters. "They're a strange pair. Very frightened and suspicious. They dress in dark clothes and keep to themselves. All day they're peering out their apartment window, like they're watching for something." Momma's brother, Sixten, was more hospitable, but neither Sixten nor his wife could comprehend why anyone would travel such a distance to see them. They were farm people who were up and about before sunrise.

A biting wind is blowing off the river that evening. Luke has pulled out a letter from Nancy Becker as we walk in Riverside Park. Holding the letter with both hands to keep it from flapping, he reads aloud one sentence under the light of a lamp. "I love you but I'm not in love with you.' What's that mean to you?"

"I don't know," I say.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Anger has replaced vulnerability on Luke's face.

I think of the LaRochefoucauld maxim and of Jim, Nancy Becker's playwright friend. "It means something has changed," I finally say.

We come to the bridge where Luke and Nancy have left the pennies. He doesn't mention the coins or check to see that they are still there. He just looks sore, as if I have written the letter and am to blame. He folds it carefully along the creases and returns it to his coat pocket as we head home.

“Blue Moon.” It is the song I think of in relation to my brother. How the moon sees Luke standing alone without a love of his own. Sees him that way in the fall, with dead leaves blown along the footpaths of the park by a strong wind. The moon seeing him not with love but not with indifference either. The moon seeing him beyond his acne face.

"Hey, look. I'm not going to be here forever. It's just for a little while, until I figure out what I want to do. It's like not even being in the building. You know what I mean?"

Momma has given Luke the apartment next door, where once upon a time the magical Miss Resnick lived, a woman of the world who nightly went up and down the vocal scale, causing Momma to pound on the wall to silence her. Momma saying, “We cannot have this. We cannot have this.” Momma, with her vision of what life is and is not.

Luke scrutinizes my face for my reaction.

"Right," I say. "Right."

Luke scrapes the walls before painting them. Then he sands the floors and applies two coats of polyurethane, turning the old wood golden. He wants to make things right for Nancy Becker, as she is coming down on the train from Vassar that weekend.

Luke has been to her home many, many times. Now she is coming to his. A big night is brewing.

“Mom, could you cook up some of those Swedish meatballs?” Luke says, and instructs her to fuss over the dinnerware to ensure the plates and cups are matching. I

watch as Momma carries the food next door. In that way Nancy Becker does not have to see the circumstances of the family apartment. After the entree, roast beef with baked potato and creamed spinach, Momma takes them some of her specially made spice cake and cups of coffee. She has this sweet smile on her face, as if all she is there for is to make them happy.

Nancy wears her hair in a bob that shows off her slender neck. Luke thinks he has never seen Nancy looking finer. She stays the night. That is a first. They have never gone all the way before. As a bonus she reaches orgasm.

“She told me that I made her feel like a real woman,” Luke says to me, after Nancy has left.

Things are not to her specifications at Vassar. She has thrown a chair through a window because of the pressure of exams. She is talking about becoming a Woolworth salesgirl.

Luke does not sing “Big Girls Don’t Cry” to Nancy Becker.

"Dig this. She says we have to get married. What do you think?"

Is my brother going to put her right there in that apartment so they can become a younger version of Chuck and Naomi? Will they sit in the luncheonette around the corner for their late afternoon morning coffee before heading down to the Earvin Bar on One Hundred Tenth Street to get soused several evenings a week?

"I don't know," I say.

“What do you mean, you don’t know.”

“I don’t know.”

“You know,” Luke says.

“No, you know,” I say.

“What do I know?” Luke says.

“Whatever it is you know,” I say.

Luke signs up with an office temp agency. In jacket and tie, he rides the rush hour subway to midtown Manhattan, where he spends the day in an office building stuffing papers in filing cabinets while pretty secretaries ignore him, reserving their attention for handsome bosses. And his weekly paycheck, a measly sum under a hundred dollars after the agency takes its cut.

The jukebox at Flynn's is loaded with Jerry Vale and Mario Lanza and Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett, and there is a miniature bowling game Luke likes to play. And Wally, the bartender, treats him real well. Around closing time he gives him a free scotch on the rocks.

"He doesn't do that for everyone, you know," Luke says. Wally is not one to play around with. He wears bright shirts with the short sleeves flipped up to show off his huge biceps. Luke has seen his takeout power in the way he dealt with a couple of rowdies and smart mouths short on respect.

And the place has a waitress named Peggy. Luke likes to order the shells with clam sauce and a little salad, and Peggy gives him extra bread. One night after her shift is over, she takes off her apron and she and Luke dance and continue the party back at his place. She has blond hair with black roots and stretch marks from the three kids. Luke has never been with a woman who is a mother before. It was different, that's all, he says.

"Why don't you introduce me to your friends sometime?" Luke says. He has seen me with the kids from Scully's stoop.

"What do you want with them? We don't do anything," I say. The request bothers me. Luke is older than my friends. How could he hope to fit in? It takes me down a sad road to hear what he is asking.

"Sorry I mentioned it. Forget it."

"No. We don't have to forget it," I say.

"I said forget it." Luke gives his right forearm to his nose and keeps it there, to signify the conversation is over.

"Going my way, Sonny?"

When I turn I am met by the megawatt grin of Lenny Cerone, at the wheel of a white four-door Bonneville with whitewall tires and a luxurious interior the color of bright red lipstick. And in the front seat next to him sits Jerry Jones-Nobleonian.

"Did I tell you he was the very best? Did I?" Jerry says.

"Don't be throwing no hamburgers at me," Lenny says to me, with a smile, referencing the downtown room where Sean had beat me.

"Oh shit. Oh shit," Jerry says, in gleeful support of Lenny, the two of them getting out of the car.

"Where have you been? I haven't seen you since that night," I say to Lenny.

"He had a falling out with his old man here in the city. So he went back out to Long Beach to live with his moms. But she was not respecting him or herself, and that

shit is hard to put up with. There's only so much a man can give and a man can take. So he's back here giving it another go with his pops," Jerry says.

"That's the truth," Lenny says.

"That's the righteous truth," Jerry says.

"Wow," I say.

"Wow, what?" Jerry says.

"Just wow. That's all," I say, as Luke comes out of the building.

"I want you to meet my best friend, Lenny from Long Beach," Jerry says to Luke.

"You see this Bonneville right here. Lenny owns it, and that's no lie."

"Hey, that's some nice set of wheels you've got," Luke says.

And Lenny says, "It's four on the floor and blow it out your ass all the way."

"I'm looking to get a car myself, or maybe a motorcycle, so I can get out of city when I want to. You know what I mean?" Luke says.

"Fucking A I know what you mean. You've got to have some freedom in this life. Come on, man. You want to go for a ride? I'll take you where you want to go," Lenny says, on the winter day that Luke falls in love with him.

"Sure. Let's go for a ride," Luke says.

"You coming? There's room," Lenny says to me.

"Not today," I say, having no need to tell him about the rampaging cars of New York City, not when he already has one.

Frieda Heinz, Jane Thayer's friend, has calculation in her eye and lust in her heart when she sees Lenny's wheels and the body and face that he is displaying. She sees him to have

leader of the pack quality and can give herself to no other, and so she becomes his in her teenage heart.

Luke's apartment is where Lenny can take Frieda so he can romance her in a place of aloneness. But Lenny's love is not a constant love. It does not provoke loyalty of the tongue or the heart. Lenny sounds on the girl he now goes with, though it is Jerry Jones-Nobleonian who is the instigator of Lenny's jibes. The Fisher truck company is going strong and has a reputation for vehicles that are built to last. "Body by Fisher" is an emphatic statement of its excellence. Now when Frieda is not on the scene, Lenny and Jerry will say "Body by Fisher" and add "face by accident," and then do a laugh thing. But it is not laughter that comes spontaneously from the belly but is more mechanical and forced laughter that has the name on it of Jerry's jealousy and pain that Frieda should be on the scene in the way that she is.

As for Luke, he has no sounding he wants or needs to do about Nancy Becker, whom he maintains in a status above his own. It is not for him to violate himself or her in that way but to live out the slow death of what they had in silence about her, because if he is unhappy away from her, he is even unhappier when they are together. Apart from her, he can tell himself that they might have some future with each other, but he can't do that when in her presence. The thing between them is dying.

The thumping bass comes through the wall. Though it is bedtime, we are treated to the raucous sound of the Dave Clark 5 and Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels. Momma does not pound the wall with her shoe for silence as she did in dealing with Miss Resnick. No. In her robe she lets herself into Luke's apartment, where he sits on the floor between

powerful speakers. She is like a mime, her words virtually inaudible. The more upset she grows, the more he laughs, as if it gives him some pleasure to see her undone and to be victorious over someone of the female kind for where he has been positioned in life. But his smile disappears when I turn off the stereo.

“Don’t mess with my music,” Luke says.

“Momma needs to sleep,” I say.

“I said don’t mess with my music, Momma’s boy.”

“Luke, be reasonable. We cannot have this,” Momma says, but Luke is not listening. He has gone into his forearm with his nose. He has gone where he needs to go.

Lenny Cerone does not always dress sharp. Sometimes he gets into the dirty, wearing an old T-short and jeans and a red bandanna around his scalp so he can go under the hood without his hair falling into his eyes and tend to the malfunctioning carburetor or misfiring pistons. Lenny Cerone does not need books or the measuring devices of the SAT or the plusque parfait or the Edict of Nantes or “the wine-red sea.” He has the knowledge he was born with and that no learning can add to.

But Momma is no fan, seeing him bent over the engine of his big Bonneville or escorting Frieda, with her flaring nostrils, up to Luke’s place to do the hanky panky. “We cannot have such a thing. He looks like a hoodlum. What will the tenants say? Have you no common sense?” she demands of Luke. But it is like with the music. He has no choice but to resist the kingdom where she would keep him so he can have a chance to live in the pleasure spaces his life has long been taking him toward.

Momma saying, "Like dirt beneath their feet they treat me, every last one of them. As if I am filth they can dispose of. Thinking that I do not see, when I see everything.

Everything."

At the Bronx bowling alley, not far from Yankee Stadium, Kevin rolls a slow ball, finishing with one leg scissored behind the other. The black beauty starts at the edge of the lane and curves gently into the head pin. Strike after strike he racks up for a final score of 220. Luis throws hard and straight and down the middle, as if impatient for that satisfying collision of pins, and gets a lot of difficult splits. Jimmy Riley does a solo bump and grind when he throws an occasional strike and does a lot of carrying on, trying to fill the cavernous place with his noise.

Jane Thayer has come along, as have Mary Marie and Cathy Cathleen. And if Mary Marie and Cathy Cathleen have their Catholic schoolgirl ways that keep them in an aura of their own goodness so they don't extend themselves to Jane, it is none of my business. I see Jane without seeing her, in the way that things have come to be. The fever has broken and cannot claim me anymore. I am like those bowling pins that get knocked down only to be set upright once again.

The music pumps me up. My ball seems to roll down the lane a little faster, my form is a little more stylish, when the juke box plays "Heat Wave." That song just owns me. But "Surfing Safari"? That song does nothing for my ball.

And then Jane Thayer goes and does her girl thing. Sitting alone on a bench, she smiles at me, a smile that melts her frost and vanishes the bill of indictment for my flesh-seeking hand and calls me back into her life. With that smile she is saying I can no longer

be bound to the boys from Scully's stoop and that it is time once again to be with her in the way that I can.

And so, though we have come separately, we leave together, ahead of Cathy Cathleen and Mary Marie and the rest of them. Not even Jimmy Riley can be called upon to shout at us in his loud and boisterous way, so busy are they all with their game. We walk away from the cream-colored walls of Yankee Stadium. There was no roaring of the crowd as Mickey Mantle or Roger Maris to bash the ball on an arc into the right field seats. The stadium is in a dark and quiet mood. It is getting its winter rest before the fever of summer comes again.

I do not ask Jane about Donnie and why she isn't with this boy who fills his jeans so well and astonishes you that God could make him as he has. I know without asking that Donnie has gone back to Maria of the big breasts and full lips and dark beauty. These things I know without them having any life in my conscious mind in order that I can fit into the space that Jane has created for me and live peacefully and happily in a state of gratitude for having been received back. And yes, so we can kiss that night in the hallway of her building on One Hundred Twenty-Second Street and I can walk home off the ground.

"I gave you this long extension in the hope that you would see your way clear to complete the assignment. Can you give me any explanation as to why you haven't followed through?" Mrs. Jacoby still has her kindness and her concern, but she also still has her teeth in this building that cannot make do with natural light but needs the operating room blaze of fluorescent bulbs.

It is hard to sit with her. Something, my anger, wants to express itself. If only she would once and for all release me from her care so the wrecking ball can come in.

“I, well, no,” I finally say.

“Well, you understand that in that case, I have no choice but to give you a failing grade?” she asks.

“Yes, I understand. You must. You must,” I say.

Claremont plays a varsity game against New York Friends, a Quaker school, that afternoon. The Friends' center is no more than five and a half feet tall, but he is fast off the floor with a huge vertical leap, like a human pogo stick. In one stretch Friends ran off sixteen straight points, putting the game out of reach by halftime.

Tom Smits has been scoring with ease. The entire first half is just one big swish time for him—hook shots and what passed for jump shots and tap-ins and driving layups. Struggling back up the court after a bucket, leaning forward with his jaw out and his padded knees pumping awkwardly, he can't know how much I want to punch him in his face for pulling farther and farther ahead.

In the locker room at halftime, my mind is stuck on the single basket I have made and what that will do to my scoring average. That we are losing is a lesser matter entirely; the team is merely a vehicle for my stardom.

When the locker room clears out, I quickly dress and race into the street, then disappear down a flight of stairs into the subway at Twenty-Third and Lexington Avenue, where I am swept along by the rush hour horde. Staring out the rear window of the last car, I think, “Find me now. Find me now” as the train leaves the lighted station behind

and enters the dark tunnel.

The news trucks have made their nightly drops downstairs and my father is accounted for. I have heard him, with all the agitation his footsteps can summon, enter the bedroom he shares with Momma. The apartment will be mine, I think, as I leave my bed and pour a glass of milk for myself in the kitchen. But now I hear their bedroom door open and footsteps approach, and it is my father, not Momma, who appears, tying the belt of his brown robe as he steps into the kitchen.

"Are you still up, my son?" he says, tightening the belt on his brown robe.

"I'll be going back to bed soon," I say. My father looks especially ancient, his face fallen and his nose spread over his face and curved like the massive beak of some strange bird. And thin, his chest plate visible in the V of his robe.

Over a plate of crumbly bleu cheese from the stash he keeps in a brown bag in the refrigerator, he sits in his corner of the dining room with a pamphlet from his shelf of religious material. The thick reading glasses blur his eyes. The room feels cold without Momma. In her I easily accept the Jesus thing. It is simply part of who she is. But religion doesn't seem as natural to my father. He is all about God and nothing about people.

"Did you want something, my son?"

My father's question has caught me by surprise.

"No, I don't want anything." His father's question had sounded like an accusation.

"Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"No. I just came out for a glass of milk."

“Are you a good boy today? Have you made your mother proud?”

“That is a very good boy. Never do anything to upset your mother. Your mother is our salvation. She is the rock on which we stand.”

“There is one thing,” I say.

“What is that, my son?”

“A man in the neighborhood said I was tall for an Armenian.”

“Who was this man?”

“A Turkish man.”

“You must learn to cross to the other side of the street.”

“Cross to the other side of the street?”

“Did I not just say that?”

“Yes.”

Do you want violence to come down on you?”

“No.”

“Then cross to the other side of the street. Always, always. Are you listening to me?” My wild-eyed father brings his hand down on the table with great force, rattling the items on the table.

“Yes, I will,” I am left to say.

“Is peace too much to ask for? Can you not give me that?”

“Yes.” My father has returned to his pamphlet. I can’t be sure he heard me.

From the other side of the wall, there comes the lonely, piercing sound of a saxophone. Mr. Garatdjian almost blows his bleu cheese through his nose. "What is that, please?" he asks, sizzle in his voice.

"I'm not sure," I say, as if it is a sound with some inexplicable source.

"Could it be him?" He arches a thick eyebrow.

"Who?"

"Who? Who else but the supremely worthless one next door would I be talking about? You will go to my cretinous son and tell him to turn down his sinfulness? You will tell him this?"

When Luke finally comes to the door, he stares at me with glazed eyes. "Come on in, man," he finally says, and closes the door behind him. The air is thick with the smell of strange smoke.

"Hey man, take a drag on this. It'll do some good things for your head," Lenny says, talking and trying to hold smoke in his lungs at the same time. He offers something too skinny to be a cigarette.

"What is it?"

"It will take you where you don't even know you want to go." Lenny says, holding out the joint.

"Go ahead. Stop being so serious," Luke says.

"No. Not tonight. Daddy's upset. He wants you to lower the volume."

"What else is new?" Luke says, even as he turns down the sound.

When I return to the apartment, my father is still in his corner and the music has grown faint.

"You won't do things like this, I am sure. You will do well by your mother and me. I have confidence in you," my father says, turning back to his pamphlet.

"Yes," I say, as I have been saying all night.

Mr. Arbuckle gives a surprise quiz in intermediate algebra the next morning, rat-a-tat-tatting the blackboard with a new stick of white chalk in posting the theorem: if $a + x = b + x$, then $a = b$ and $-(-a) = a$. Then he folds his arms and smiles that thwart smile as I stare at the trapezoid he has drawn along with the theorem.

After the class I run into Tom in the boy's room.

"What happened to you yesterday?"

Doesn't he know? "I just didn't feel like playing anymore."

"Jesus. So you just walk off at halftime? Did you know we came within two points of winning?"

I am more used to Tom being sarcastic than angry. The news that it has turned into a close game only worsens my feelings toward him. "I guess that's too bad," I say.

"You really need to get with it," Tom replies, and pushes past me.

In homeroom I lift the top of my desk and pull out my French text, then sink into my seat, imagining Mlle. Gallimard's rouged and quivering cheeks as she stares at me with her special Gallic scorn for showing up with homework undone. An idea comes to me. Why not skip the class? For that matter, why not take off the whole afternoon?

Lunch-hour din from the cafeteria carries out into the hallway as I pass by. How good to be apart from all that social racket and by myself, I think, as I enter the locker room the next door down.

"Close the door and sit down." Mr. Sadowski is leaning back in his chair with his feet up on the desk and his jacket off. The white shirt he wears with his loosened red tie is slightly wrinkled from prior use. A food tray with the remnants of his brown bag lunch

rests on the gray metal desk. Of course. Mr. Sadowski is like me, as uncomfortable at the Claremont School as I am. When have I ever seen him eating with other faculty members in the cafeteria?

"Do you want to tell me what happened yesterday?" The soles of Mr. Sadowski's scuffed black shoes are worn. His feet are as big as my father's. City sophistication will never attach to him; he belongs to the hardscrabble region he came from.

"I wasn't feeling well," I say, settling on a kind of truth.

"And you felt no responsibility to tell someone?" Mr. Sadowski speaks without anger, his voice a low and sincere rumble.

"I wasn't thinking."

"I thought you had come a long way since ninth grade. You seemed more relaxed and a part of things. And if you fill out a little more and maybe work with weights over the summer, there's always the possibility of an athletic scholarship. You have real ability to play college ball, and your teachers speak well of you. Is something bothering you that you'd like to talk about?"

He has no business saying that. It is not right to talk about possibility. When things are done they are done, and the thing to do is to keep them done unless cruelty is your aim.

"Everything is fine." I say the words with the finality the situation deserves.

"You have a good record, but your teachers at the last faculty meeting said your grades were beginning to slip noticeably. Mrs. Jacoby and Mlle. Gallimard were concerned. If there's anything on your mind, you can see me at any time. Understand that I'm always available to talk to you."

"Thank you."

"I'd like to see you come back to the team. In fairness to the others, I'd have to keep you on the bench for a couple of games."

The bell rings for the next period. I stay behind after Mr. Sadwoski leaves, grab my parka from the locker, and exit through the side door, climbing the stairs to street level. I walk quickly, trying to outrun my talk with Mr. Sadowski and expel his words and attention from my being, all that caring manliness that shakes me so I can't so much as think. But one thing I can think, and more than that, *know*, as I pass a fur-wrapped woman walking her toy poodle on a long leash, is something Park Avenue-faced Mr. Arbuckle, with his theorems and rat-a-tat chalk, will never know, that sometimes the best addition is by subtraction.

From my seat on the sundial, there on the Columbia mall, I watch not Jane but a couple of students who turn their heads as she approaches, noting with excitement as well as fear their reflexive response to a pretty teenage girl. When she draws even closer, I notice something else. Her eyes are red and puffy from crying.

"Did something happen?"

"Dear old Mommy was blotto again and throwing around her accusations about how my father doesn't sleep with her because he's sleeping with me. When I told her to cut it out, she slapped me in the face. I'm so sick of those two. She's drunk within three hours of getting up and he spends more time with his mother than he does with her. I just can't wait to get out of that place." She almost screamed the words out.

Her description of the clash summons the same distress as when I have witnessed

violence at home. And now I have to worry that she will connect me to her mother because am I not a slapper, too?

We head down to the Turks' restaurant, where Jack Jones is singing "Wives and Lovers" on the jukebox. Jack Jones is always singing "Wives and Lovers" on the College Inn jukebox. Something about hey little girl and how she has to fix her hair because wives can be and have to be lovers too when their husbands walk through the door. Jack Jones sings in a silk shirt and sharply creased pants and an oil slick in his hair.

After several false starts I say, "You know, someday I think we're going to get married, don't you?"

"I don't know. I guess so." The crankiness in her voice isn't encouraging.

"Well, since that's going to happen, I was thinking it would be okay if we went all the way now. I mean, if we're getting married anyway, why shouldn't we?" I grip the sugar dispenser, running my hand down it, fearing her fury.

"I need time to think about it," she says.

Married. Sadness overcame me just saying the word. I see an ironing board. I see curlers. I see the world leaving me behind. The word strips me of my youth and turns me instantly old. I leave her that afternoon feeling dishonest, as if I am pretending to believe in something I really am unsure about.

Momma is reaching into the big white wooden box on castors as I come down the stairs onto the seventh-floor landing. The box is filled with sheets, pillowcases, and towels, freshly laundered in the basement. It is for her to distribute the bedding and the towels to the tenants, floor by floor, a weekly process that involves collecting the soiled items.

"Were you looking for me?" Momma asks, having raised up from the cart with an armful of bedding and towels.

I stare at her massive upper arms and the patches of cellulite. "I was wondering...." I stop, unable to continue.

"What is it, Gideon? Tell me."

"Do you think I could talk to you about having a room of my own somewhere in the building? It doesn't have to be big. It could be the smallest room you have."

"But why? Is there something wrong where you are?"

"It's just that it's sort of noisy sometimes. I'd like a quieter place to study."

"That is so even though Luke is no longer there?"

Her mention of Luke is unwelcome. It reintroduces the lineage of failure I am a part of.

"It's a little hard to concentrate."

"Of course we can find you another room, if that will help you with your schoolwork. Of course we can. You just leave it to me," she says, pushing open one of the four compartment doors and entering the long hallway to make her room delivery.

I pause on my way down the stairwell at a partially open window, which looks out over the tarred roofs of the smaller buildings to Riverside Park and the Hudson River and the Palisades. On clear afternoons, with the sun in the west, you can stand in the same spot and the light touching the walls and stairs and landing create an impression of spacious cleanliness and order. With the darkness, however, comes a sense of compression and disorder and impending ruin, a clutter of people and things and a rotting infrastructure of old and brittle pipes and frayed electrical wiring, beams that soon will

snap under the weight they support and large chunks of masonry about to break free and plummet to the street. But what does it matter that the building is not a place to tie my fortunes to when the possibility of seeing Jane Thayer naked on a bed behind a locked door is close at hand? And yet, as I allow myself to think this way, I am blindsided by a wave of guilt and find myself running to Momma down the long compartment. I will tell her I don't need the room and that my asking is all a mistake.

And there I see her, through the ajar door of a tenant's room. She has stripped the stained mattress and left the fresh sheets and pillowcases at the foot of the bed. With her back to me she stands, leafing through the pages of one of the man's magazines, the kind with naked or partially clad women I see in the racks of Sol's luncheonette. It is not for me to disturb Momma. It is not for me to do anything but back away and run down the stairs. It is not for me to think about what I have seen anymore, for Momma is not of the world she has been staring at in those pages. Momma is not, *is not*.

In the morning, Momma says, "My son, I had a dream last night. The men of the building came to me on the seventh floor landing. From all four compartments they streamed. Seven in all were they, and formed a circle around me and kneeled and then prostrated themselves. I do not like this dream, my son. I do not like it one bit. It is not normal to be worshiped in this way."

"No," I say.

"What is that you say?"

"Nothing. I say nothing. I don't know," I say.

“Going somewhere?” I say to Jerry as he comes out of his building.

“I’m going to school, man.”

“Why do you want to do that?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“It’s just a question,” I say.

We descend into the subway and ride with the rush hour crowd to Times Square and then catch the Flushing Main Street Line out to Queens. The train emerges from the tunnel and as it climbs the el, the smell of baking bread from the nearby SilverCup factory fills the car. At each stop worn-looking men in Dickey work pants and white socks, some toting metal lunch buckets, enter the car. Some quality of grimness attaches to them, as if life has stripped away everything—their dreams, their hopes, their looks—but their breath. I see with terrifying clarity my possible future in the narrowness of their existence.

I had some vague plan to visit the site of the World’s Fair, which is supposed to open sometime that spring, but not even seeing the massive Unisphere and pavilion after pavilion of futuristic buildings as the train approaches Flushing Meadow can lift me from the sinking sense that I am on a train to nowhere, playing hooky with someone who is more part of my past than my present.

“This is fucked up, man,” Jerry says, sitting across from me in the now empty subway car. “I’m going back to school.”

In the steep balcony, men sit singly, some snoring, their legs over the backs of the chairs in the next row down. Pale overhead lights expose the debris under the seats and in the

aisles—waxed paper cups, popcorn tubs, candy wrappers—in this lowlife twenty-four-hour movie Times Square movie theater fallen from the grandeur of its stage-show beginnings. But then the lights are dimmed and a film called *The Days of Wine and Roses* begins. A public relations guy who drinks a lot falls in love with a secretary, a woman who doesn't drink at all. She takes him home to meet her father. In one terrifying scene, Jack Lemmon writhes, suffering delirium tremens, on the floor of a greenhouse, having torn apart flowerpots in a mad search for the bottle he has hidden. By now Jack Lemmon and the secretary are man and wife, and she has begun to drink, too.

I can imagine meeting the same fate as Jack Lemmon, but it would be heroin that hooks me, not alcohol, like those nodding junkies on the street, men and even women standing in place with their heads hanging and their knees buckling and their torsos twisted. And there won't be any such descent for Jane either. In fact, she is my real focus of concern. No, she will not join the women who walk the streets at night. She will not fall from life's favor and end up in some seedy bungalow with only her bottle, although without me she might. Oh, how anxious I am now to save her.

"I've been thinking about what you asked me," Jane says that afternoon as I feign distraction, flipping through the jukebox selections at our booth in the Turk's diner. "I mean, it is true that we are going to be married, even if not right away," she goes on. Her voice and expression are full of earnestness. I can see that she has he struggled to convince herself of the rightness of the position she is about to take. "And we do love each other."

Married. That word again. How simpleminded she sounds.

"I mean, we are going to get married, aren't we?"

"Of course we are," I say, a sense of relief coming over me when we part.

"You see. You even have a new desk to study at, and a beautiful new sofa that converts into a bed," Momma says, showing me the narrow room with anxious excitement. Simon Weill has purchased the sofas and desk in quantity. Whether it is new furnishings or a new elevator or a new washing machine for the basement laundry or any other large transaction, Simon Weill sees to the details. It is for Auntie Eve and Momma to collect rent money and do the tenants' laundry and manage the work crew who paint rooms and replace fuses and otherwise maintain the building.

Momma's humble desire to please sharply revives in me awareness of the monstrosity of my deception. But I can't allow myself to go down that road of guilt and remorse. It is, after all, my life, not hers, that I am ruining, if that was what I am doing.

That first night in my new room I think of Luke in his suite of rooms and Naomi and Chuck in their room and Hannah in hers. Though the streetlamps are on to light the darkness, perhaps Naomi is only now getting up to start her day. Maybe she too believed, when she took that room upstairs, that it was simply a matter of time before she moved away. Perhaps Hannah thought the same thing. Suppose ten or twenty years go by and I am still there. But then Jane enters my mind and dispels such thoughts as I fall asleep picturing her lying beside me, just the two of us behind a locked door at last.

As the days pass, it seems strange that the school does not inquire about my absence. Has

it gone unnoticed? Does the school not care? All I know is that my truancy is gaining an irreversible momentum. Each morning, I maintain the charade of normalcy, leaving home in my uniform for a day of solitary exploration, which generally means returning to those dirty movie theaters along Forty-second Street where joyless men, unemployed and homeless, can sleep off a drunk from the night before in those uncomfortable chairs and I can escape my reality for a few hours watching suave, heroic James Bond in *Dr. No* engage with bikini-clad Ursula Andress emerging from the aquamarine Caribbean like a glistening goddess, and I can feel terror at the sinister machinations of Dr. No and SPECTRE, his organization committed to evil. And there is *Hud*, which makes me inwardly groan with admiration and envy that Paul Newman can fill his jeans so well as he leans his psychic weight upon Patricia Neal before he so much as even touches her. And there is Tippi Hedren, in *The Birds*, to fall in love with, too. That a woman can call herself Tippi, so light, before landing on you with her weightier surname.

"What'll it be?" The nametag on the woman's white smock says Rosie Sullivan. Her severe expression as she stares at me from behind the counter is intimidating.

"I'd like a box of prophylactics," I say. A more neutral word than condom, and *rubbers* sounds too informal.

She places her hands on the counter and leans toward me. "What kind of prophylactics do you have in mind?" It is a word she takes her time with.

"What kind have you got?"

She recites their names, in a voice loud enough to reach the ends of the store. Trojans. Ramses. I keep my head down, fixing my eyes on the colognes and perfumes in

the glass case.

"Ramses, please," I murmur, not knowing one brand from another.

She isn't finished. "What size?"

There are different sizes? "Regular size," I say.

"You have a good night now," she says, after I pay for and pocket the small box she produces.

Jane is out front of the building, surrounded by Lenny and Jerry and Luke, as I arrive from the Whelan's Drugstore.

"You don't mind if I borrow your girlfriend for a while and drive her around and show her the sights, do you?" Lenny asks, putting his arm around Jane briefly.

I try to laugh but wish they would all disappear.

"Hey, don't do anything we wouldn't do," Jerry says, as we enter the building.

Upstairs, I wait in the public bathroom down the hall while she undresses. She wants it that way, she says. When I return, she is in bed, with the covers up to her neck, her clothes in a small clump on the floor.

She places her hands on my chest to stop me, though when I finally succeed there is no cry of pain. The rhythm and the release that develop are pleasurable, and more than that, but somehow the aftermath is even more remarkable, the hours I spend in wonder that I have actually been inside her and that we have done *it*.

"Kind of a mess down there, but don't panic. I know how to clean it up with salt and water," she says, of the blood on the sheet.

A shout, brutal and close, rises from the street.

"Yo, Gideon."

Luis. But how has he found us?

Then it is Kevin. "Hey, Gideon. We know you're up there. Jerry told us where we could find you."

"Come on, man. We're going up to the gym to play some ball." Now it is Scully. As proof of their intentions, someone is now dribbling a basketball on the sidewalk below. Suppose they barge into the building and up to the room itself? My hideaway feels in danger of being overrun.

"Hey, my man, get your ass to the window before I come up there and whip it good," Jimmy Riley goes.

"We've lost him," Kevin says.

"Fuck him. He's done for." Luis again. But what does he mean, done for?

"Yo, Gideon, I'm going to whale on your ass for this," Jimmy Riley promises, in that strange way he has of offering threats as an expression of love.

And then the street falls quiet, the sound of the basketball bouncing off the pavement growing ever fainter.

I touch her down below. "Not now. I'm pretty sore," she says.

Momma combs out her hair by the full-length mirror in the vestibule and then begins to braid it.

"There is a parents' meeting tonight at your school that I must attend."

Three weeks have passed since my truancy began.

"Did you not hear me?"

"I did," I say.

“Your teachers speak so glowingly of you.”

“Yes,” I say, imagining her face when Mr. Horst-Lehman or some other faculty member tells her of my absence. He hasn’t been at school? But how can such a thing be? Her face stricken with worry and pain. Leaving the school crushed, in tears, humiliated, and feeling the whole weight of the world upon her and nobody to turn to, not my father, who doesn’t even know what school I am attending or what grade I am in. All she will have is God, and on the long bus ride home she will question him with hot tears streaming down her face, asking what she has done to deserve children such as these: an oldest daughter who is prideful and disagreeable and lazy; a second daughter who takes pills and drinks and sleeps away the day and who has married a drunken bum; and even Rachel, with her fine mind, going crazy with drink and disappearing after dropping out of that fine college she had worked so hard to get into; and now her sons turning out to be worthless as well. She will feel all these things and I will have to die for having failed her.

Or maybe she will flag a cab. Time away from the building is no small matter. Anything could happen while she is away. One fire, one disaster, and we could all be out on the street and then what would we have? Nothing. We would be like the welfare people down the block, our lives turned instantly into a nightmare of bleakness.

Or maybe she will not be so meek and humble at the parents’ meeting. Maybe she will shake a fist in the jowly face of Mr. Horst-Lehman with his lewd mouth and his tailored suits. Maybe she will tell them all that they have no right treating her like dirt and what Jesus and God and the Holy Ghost have in store for them and how their rich garments and all their worldly goods would be burned away from them in the fires of hell

and about the gnashing of teeth they can look forward to in perpetuity.

But then, as the day moves along, I wonder again what kind of school it is that doesn't notify Momma when I have been missing for weeks? And the answer was obvious. A school that has judged me to be of no worth after perceiving that I am underweight in both body and mind. It is because I am not Bert Bach or Ogden Connifer or John Edel with their brilliant PSAT scores, or Diane Coleman with her beauty queen looks or Robin Abel who reeks of Park Avenue that they do not call. It was because I am insubstantial Gideon Garatdjian.

I return to Forty-second Street, where *McClintock* is playing. Big John Wayne can not only not sling lead in the Old West but court a woman the likes of stormy Maureen O'Hara. At noon I head down to Battery Park, at the tip of Manhattan, and ride the ferry out to Staten Island. The water is rough, the winds strong. Forces are at work to sink the vessel into the ocean deep. The earth is Momma, and I cannot be too long from her.

I pull back the shade. Under the glare of a streetlamp stand Luke with Lenny and Jerry beside the Bonneville. Luke's white dress shirt, the kind he would wear to St. Andrews School with his blazer and tie, is hanging out of his pants. He has grown sloppy since graduation. It is something to notice, along with his idleness.

When the knock comes, I am lying on the convertible sofa. I stub out my cigarette and open the window. If she smells the smoke, so be it; I don't want her to see me with a lighted Marlboro.

"Can you tell me why?" she asked, in a quiet voice, locking the door behind her. She wears a light brown dress, the same one she saves for church days.

"I don't know." Nothing comes to mind, not difficult classmates or anything else that might win her sympathy or understanding. There is no need to put anything in the way of her inevitable sorrow.

"So you wish to do like the others, is that it? You also wish to disappoint me? Can you not at least answer me?"

"I couldn't be there anymore."

"Why didn't you at least tell me? Why did I have to find out in such a way?"

"I just couldn't."

"Are you having trouble with Jane?"

"No."

"So you went and deceived me. You tricked me into giving you this room. You did not want it for your schoolwork at all. You were not even in school when you came to me. How could you do something so low?" She begins to cry.

When she leaves, I smoke another cigarette. If there are fear and guilt, there is also something else. Momma's tears are dangerous. I am in need of protection from them.

She comes back that night. When there is conflict, she always comes back. "It is I," she says, knocking on the door. Momma pays attention to language. She knows her predicate nominative.

"But can we not be reasonable? What will you do?"

"I don't know."

"But can you not tell me if there is something that upset you?"

"No," I say.

I count it as something that her eyes are dry when she goes away again.

From the window of the bus, the leafless trees appear skeletal. The park has a bleakness to it as the city slowly transitions from winter to spring. A solitary Parks Department worker pokes here and there with his gaff, spearing pieces of litter and depositing them in the canvas sack slung from his shoulder. Maybe I too could work for the Parks Department. I love the park, don't I? Don't I love walking the footpaths of Central Park and Riverside Park? I could sit on a bench in the warm sun having my lunch and do my part to maintain order on the grounds.

Or seeing the familiar sight of a UPS driver in a chocolate brown uniform carrying an armful of parcels into a Fifth Avenue building, I wonder if such a life couldn't be mine in the future as well. No mystery of pi. No SAT. A simple life.

"What's the matter, Garatdj? You been sick or something?" Freddy Snyder speaks at his knock-down-the-walls volume.

"Yeah. He's sick of all your questions," Lance says, winking at me.

Always the same shtick between Lance and Freddy, whose communication does not depend on words.

By midmorning, everyone is leaving me alone, even Tom Smits, their curiosity satisfied. But then, at the lunch hour, whether he means to or not, Mr. Arbuckle turns and makes eye contact with me at an adjoining table. Worse, he is getting up and heading my way.

"May I join you?"

"Sure."

"Uh, how are things going?" he asks, sitting opposite me.

I feel sorry for Mr. Arbuckle. He shouldn't have to leave the company of Diane Coleman to take on the unwelcome task of showing concern he doesn't genuinely feel to a dull student. Probably Mr. Horst-Lehman has put him up to this, now that my truancy has been discovered. Mr. Arbuckle's eyes have a dark, shiny luster. They are like an insect's eyes, offering a smile more menacing than warm. They are sexual eyes, like those of the man in the loden coat those years ago in the Times Square bookstore. And those inflated lips. Surely Mr. Funelli would say of Mr. Arbuckle that he too likes to kiss.

"Things are okay."

"One thing my father told me was that no matter what situation I found myself in, I had to keep moving forward. I had to keep my legs driving, he said. Life demands toughness. We all have difficulties we must overcome."

"Yes," I say, glancing over at Diane Coleman as she sipped through a straw from her half-pint of milk. But her eyes on mine force me to look away. They defeat me every time.

"It's best to make life as tidy an affair as possible. Unhappiness can be an indulgence and is controllable if we really try. "Is there anything you would like to ask me or say?" Mr. Arbuckle fidgets with one of his rings. It holds a red stone.

"No. I'd just like to thank you for talking to me."

"Remember that I am here any time you need me."

When the bell rings signaling the end of lunch, I leave the building. The street is calling. The park is calling. Fear and hatred and hurt feelings are calling.

“He’ll see you now, Sweetie,” Miss Redding says, bathing me in her soft Southern voice as she holds open the door to Mr. Horst-Lehman’s carpeted office. Behind a huge desk he sits, bifocals halfway down his mottled nose. The rich black suit and dazzling yellow tie he wears only add to his commanding aura.

We are not alone. It comes as a surprise, not a happy one, to see Mr. Sadowski also present. He wears a lesser suit of mailman’s gray and scuffed black shoes.

"Mr. Sadowski would like to say a few words to you," Mr. Horst-Lehman says, a faint note of condescension in his tone and the smile that has replaced the forbidding stare.

"I just want to say you have your whole life ahead of you. You'd be far better off going through with the school year than withdrawing. Whatever happens with your grades, you're at least on the right track."

I am terrified of hurting and angering Mr. Sadowski, who talks so earnestly, and who means so much to me, and yet the words come out anyway. “I can’t stay,” I say, staring at the carpeted floor.

"Where will you go?" Mr. Horst-Lehman asks.

“Go?” I don’t understand Mr. Horst-Lehman’s question.

"You would have to enroll at Commerce High School." I recognize the name of the school. Jerry Jones-Nobleonian is now enrolled there. How special Claremont has made me feel. How much I am now giving up. But when something is ruined, it is ruined.

"Okay," I say, unable to hide his disappointment. He hadn’t thought of going to another school at all.

"Perhaps you would be more comfortable with the level of competition at such an

institution. If I may say so, I think your real problem is your fear of competing. You're not exceptionally bright, if intelligence tests are any indication of the caliber of one's mind. And I see you failed to take the PSAT this past fall. Maybe it is a fear of finding out the level of your abilities that is the real issue here."

The words sting, but inwardly I accept the truth of what Mr. Horst-Lehman says. He is only confirming what I already know.

"At some point in your life you will have to develop a backbone," " he goes on.

"Yes," I say. A backbone.

"You take care of yourself, Sweetie," Miss Redding says, offering me a smile on my way out.

She comes to my room and knocks on my door. Still in my flannel pajamas, I let her in. She puts down the school books clutched against her chest and undresses, and we do what we do on the still warm and unmade bed. It is like that many mornings now; waiting until afternoon is just too hard.

We leave together afterward and catch the IRT local to Sixty-sixth Street, where I coax her off the train and into a dank-smelling underpass connecting the uptown and downtown platforms. Temporarily by ourselves, we kiss, long deep kisses, as if I am stuck to her, then pull apart at the sound of footsteps in the echoing passageway. Down the stairs comes an old man, his gait agonizgly slow. When he passes by, we resume.

And then another set of footsteps follows and a voice, a familiar one, echoes along the tiled walls.

"Way to go, Romeo."

Lance flies past, with a grin and a wave, before disappearing.

"Do you know him?"

"Just someone from Claremont," I say.

I slowly mount the stairs to street level, praying that the crosstown bus has already come and taken Lance to the East Side. Mortifying thoughts flood my mind of Lance informing Freddy Snyder and Robin Abel and Diane Coleman and the rest of them that he has seen Squarehead kissing his girlfriend in a subway underpass. I try to block the images with baseball statistics from the previous year, the overpowering left arm of Sandy Koufax delivering high heat and twelve to six curveballs and the fleet feet of Maury Wills.

I will be more careful in future. I will stay out of the underpass with Jane. I must never go where Claremont is, even if I have removed the school from my life, like the patch no longer stitched to the breast pocket of my blazer.

Far over by the East River on Sixty-fifth Street stands the Ridge School in a tired-looking brick building. It takes in cutups and dull souls turned away by more rigorous schools and whose parents have enough money to pay the tuition. The boys have names like Lazzeri and Franco and O'Reilly and Sullivan and pissed-off looks on their faces. The girls crack their gum.

Mr. Diehl jots logarithms on the board: $\tan A$, $\cos B$, $\sin C$. His face shows broken blood vessels like those in a roadmap and his hand shakes as he tried to control the chalk. He wears what looks like a polyester red tie.

Nearby, in a small, cheerless park, I sit on a concrete bench and eat my store-

bought ham and cheese sandwich. A gray stillness pervades the hour. The seesaw and slide and swings and jungle gym draw no screaming children.

Now the future is a roaring pain again. The Frenchman's maxim is back, driving me to pace through the park. How am I to go away to college? How? Will she not die? Will I not die? Maybe I can attend a college close by and see her on weekends. But the construction doesn't hold. It never does. If I could only call her now, or better yet, be with her and protect her from lurking danger. Someone could be plunging a knife in her chest or pushing her off a subway platform in front of an incoming train. I sit down again and cover my head with my hands. The world is a very dangerous place for Jane Thayer to be.

"It is your friend Tom on the phone," Momma says, having come to my room. And so I follow her into the apartment and take the call.

"I've been missing you. How are things going?"

"Fine," I say.

"Did you find another school?"

"Sure."

"What's the name of it?"

"Why?"

"Why? I'm curious. That's why. We're friends, man."

"It doesn't have a name."

"A school without a name. OK. Are you playing ball?"

"No." I do not feel the need to tell Tom that the new school has some I-can-place-

my-elbows-above-the-rim-and-cop-a-smoke-before-coming-down types and that there was no place for him on such a squad.

"Look, I really want us to stay in touch," Tom says.

"Sure. We'll stay in touch," I say, and head back to my room.

The preparatory books bring the reality of the SAT too close and so I turn to fantasy, trying numbers like 749 and 701 and 663 that will place me in the circle of the chosen, leave me invulnerable to attack, and able to maintain eye contact with the Diane Colemans and Robin Abels of this world.

On the morning of the test, with two sharpened number 2 pencils in my pocket, I head for Hamilton Hall, in Columbia University, after a cup of coffee at Chock Full O'Nuts. As I approach the test site, I hear without hearing the voice that cautions me not to go where I do not belong.

Among the milling students Mark spotted Ogden Connifer, his spine curved, standing apart. My anxiety drives me toward my former classmate.

"Are you nervous?" I ask.

"Why would I be nervous?" Ogden offers a puzzled smile, as if to say, how could you even think such a thing?

Minutes later, in the auditorium, the proctor hands out the test booklets and offers instructions before asking the students to unseal the booklets and begin.

How many numbers are there between 260 and 389? If two circles of radii 4" and 9" have their centers...?

Unable to comprehend, I begin to skip, feeling the pressure to reach the finish

line, and seek only those questions I can quickly answer. But on the math part those questions are few, and when I backtrack to the more difficult ones, they still stymie me. A wave of self-destructive soreness enfolds me. The sons of bitches with their tricky questions. They want to see me fail.

I fall back on guesswork, my pencil hovering over the columns on the slick coated paper. If the previous answer had been in Column D, surely the following would have to be in another column. Or no, maybe those Educational Testing Service people in Princeton, New Jersey, are being clever and the correct answer is Column D again.

Unable to restrain myself, I seek out Ogden after the math and verbal sections of the test have ended.

"How do you think you did?" I say.

"An amusing morning," Ogden replies.

That afternoon, the achievement tests in history, French, and English summon none of the soreness that I had experienced in the math aptitude section earlier in the day, and by evening, my mental landscape begins to brighten. The conviction even comes that my pencil had been directed to the right answers. Big numbers begin to flash before me, numbers my mind can feast on. I really am going somewhere. Life is good once again.

Warmer weather arrives. I sit alone in the park with the *Daily News* and my own thoughts for company, grateful for a break from this shell of a school. Now there are others in the park as well, drawn by the beautiful spring day. A little boy clings to the safety bar across the front of the baby swing his mother sends in an arc back and forth through the air. The child has an ecstatic smile on his pale, chubby face. Such a happy

sight, a little boy with his attentive, caring mother.

A cardboard box sits atop the bottom half of the Dutch door leading to the office when I return. The words "SAT scores" are written in magic marker on the side of the box. Several students sort eagerly through the booklets, tossing them back until they find their own. The results have come too fast. I leave and walk around the block. When I return, only several booklets remain. There, on a label glued to the cover, is my name, following which there are numbers. I place the folded booklet in my pocket and retreat to a bathroom stall, where I look again to be certain I haven't misread the results, but there they are, intractable evidence of my incompetence. I peel the strip off the booklet and deposit little pieces of it in the garbage.

Like steers wrestled to the ground and seared with a hot poker in those TV westerns, I too have been branded. The mark of failure is indelibly on me. I have been herded in among the losers, separated forever from the Ogden Connifers and Diane Colemans and Robin Abels. Irreversible. Indelible—that is the crushing thing. And it doesn't matter if anyone else knows. *I know*. With complete clarity I understand that those numbers next to my name will be with me for the rest of my life as the quantifiable measure of my worth.

"Baby, baby, baby don't leave me." Everywhere I go in the summer heat the Supremes are singing to a pulsing bass, their sound menthol cool and hot at the same time. Or Martha and the Vandella are swinging and swaying as they tick off the names of cities where people are dancing in the street—Baltimore and D.C., and Philadelphia, PA, and

instructing me not to forget the Motor City. Infectious excitement if not joy they foment, but I cannot soar with their sound, the numbers I have received a constant weight anchoring me to the ground.

I do not work at Mr. Fried's supermarket, as I had the summer before. That is over and done with. Now I report to the BonTon Cleaners on the corner of One Hundred Twelfth Street. Mathematician Charlie owns the establishment. All the correct numbers are stored in his brain pan sufficient that he graduated from MIT and can greet each customer with a self-assured smile that tells them who they are dealing with.

A Negro named Ronnie manages the store in Mathematician Charlie's frequent absence. He too has abundant brain power, having attended the Bronx High School of Science before dropping out for reasons he does not explain. Ronnie stands short and chunky with an energy that sets his being in motion even when he is resting in place. Some blockage of his unformulated desire may be going on to make his smile less than what it appears. I am aware of the white boy status to which his smile assigns me and the distance we maintain through politeness, some kind of narrow demilitarized zone along which we must walk.

But another Negro, Leroy, works in the back, taller than Ronnie and louder in what he has to say. "That motherfucker come back here one more motherfucking time giving me his motherfucking shit I'm gonna put his sorry white ass in the presser. You dig what I'm saying?"

"Sure. I dig it," I say, because Leroy seems to be addressing his remarks solely to me, his full and powerful voice impacting my shore like a powerful wave.

"You hear that, Ronnie? This motherfucking white boy digs it I be putting his

white-assed motherfucking boss in the presser. This motherfucking white boy is all right.” Leroy has a giant mouth in a handsome square face from which his commotion of sound pours. He lives in the ground of his pain, relieving it with his words so he doesn’t have to do what he says he will do to Mathematician Charlie, a man too large for the hissing presser unless Leroy were to bend and fold him or do something else even more diabolical. And so now I have come to love Leroy as well for his heart pounding with its own goodness, the words to the contrary a camouflage, as with Jimmy Riley.

To be with Negroes is to be in another world that smells of happiness and the street and strange pain.

“Why you always leaning like that?” Ronnie says to me, seeing me use the wall next to the automated rack of garments sheathed in plastic for support.

“I don’t know.”

“We calling you Leaner from now on,” Leroy says. “That OK with you we call you Leaner?”

“Sure. That’s OK,” It sounds friendlier than some other ones.

Leroy peels a ten from the top of a roll of bills he keeps in his pants pocket.

“Here’s what you do, Leaner. I’m feeling the need for a taste. You know what a motherfucking taste is, Leaner?”

“A taste for something to eat?”

“What I had in mind was beverage, Leaner. Now you know that liquor store right across the street as you walk out of here?”

“I know it,” I say.

“You go there and get me a pint of vodka. They give you any trouble, just say it’s

for Leroy. You go on now.”

When I come back, Leroy extracts the bottle from the paper bag and cracks the seal and swallows half the clear alcohol. “That’s some good shit, boy, some good motherfucking shit,” he says. He goes back to pressing garments. As the day passes, Leroy becomes less voluble. The alcohol has deposited him in the sullen place. Not that he’s really drunk. All that heat from the presser steams the alcohol out of him, big beads of sweat forming on his arms and face.

A week later, when the Negroes of New York City go up against the police of New York City for days on end for an injustice they perceive, causing the very buildings themselves to tremble, Leroy says, “Don’t you be going up to Harlem now, motherfucking white boy Leaner. Black man gonna rip your ass if you do.” And when my eyes go wider than they are already with fright, Leroy can laugh, showing off a gold tooth, and say, “Shee-it” in a way I have never heard the word said before, calling attention not to the thing named but some feeling instead that only interminable elongation can express.

On the days that mathematician Charlie does not need me, there is still stickball. The bats we swing now to hit our singles, doubles, triples, and homeruns are thick, store-bought things with taped handles, not broken-off broomsticks.

And there is Lenny, bonded to his Bonneville and the street and Frieda, and the language that he speaks: cams and V-8 and piston rings and divided grilles and quad headlights and twin fins. Only the Bonneville is now the Moon Mobile, so named because of Jerry’s talent for showing his bare ass to selected viewers in other vehicles on

the Henry Hudson Parkway. And there is Terry Stafford too, singing that song “Suspicion” about how every time he kisses her, he can’t be certain that she loves him. So earnestly and fast does Terry Stafford sing. “Suspicion”—a song that sticks in the mind.

"I can do anything with you I want," I say.

"I don't like to hear things like that," Jane says, as if she has seen something I don't want her to see. We are naked in my room on a hot night.

"No, no. I have no power. I'm just nice," I want to say. A neutral nation, with no invading army. With no army at all.

Questions come in the night. How does something fresh come to feel old? How does something joyous come to feel oppressive? How have I come to tarnish Jane Thayer so she will never again be desirable to the world? How, by contrast, do Cathy Cathleen and Mary Marie appear to sparkle? Is it that they do not allow the boys to get funny with them? Why do I see Jane as a shunned vessel in the ocean deep and weeping at the fact of her own aloneness? Why do I have it in my mind that Cathy Cathleen and Mary Marie would deny Jane safe harbor? Why is it painful to be with Jane Thayer and painful not to be with her?

Not SAT questions. Just questions. Could someone not answer them? Could someone please understand that my mind is working on the problem of salvation for Jane and me all the time?

The window of Funelli's grocery store is covered with whitewash. Sean is now a checker

at the newly opened GoobleGood down on One Hundred Tenth Street and Broadway, where the old Nemo Theater had been. He will no longer be pumping his balloon-tired bicycle impervious to and disdainful of the traffic coming toward him. Now he is only one of many in a store with wide aisles and bright fluorescent lighting. He will not be helping himself to ham and cole slaw the way he did.

Scully's breasts jiggle as he comes toward me. Megawatt hatred shines in his lynx's eyes.

"Looking for your friends?" he asks, making it clear I am not one of them.

"I guess," I say. It is one of those nights when the air doesn't move, as Momma would say.

"Well, they're not around."

Scully looks like he has just stepped from the shower, his hair scrubbed pink and his hair the only thin thing about him; someday, he will be bald like his red-faced father.

I offer Scully a Marlboro from the crush-proof box. He lights up and walked off.

"Where are you going?" I call to him.

"I'm walking. That's where I'm going," Scully says, keeping his back to me.

I follow him onto the Columbia campus, where he lies on the lawn, rests his hands on his stomach, and lets out a contented sigh.

"I was wondering—what I mean is do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Go ahead. Ask me anything." Scully keeps his eyes on the heavens.

"It's just this. Jane and I have been sleeping together for a while now. I guess what I want to know is this. Do you think that if we were to stop, things could go back to the way they were?"

Scully sits up straight. "What kind of question is that?"

"I don't know. It's just a question."

Scully brings his face close to mine. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"I guess I am."

"You really want an answer?"

"I really do," I say.

"The answer is...." Scully pauses, his smile widening. "N-o." He follows with a hard slap to my face. "See you later, Fucko."

I don't pursue him. I don't do anything. My mind seems to be spinning faster than the wheels of the cars down on Broadway. There has to be a way for Jane and me to get back together the way we had been before going all the way. There has to be. And yet Fatso Scully has said no. With my own ears I heard him.

"There is too much weight. I can't breathe," I say to Jane Thayer the next morning.

"What do you mean, you can't breathe?"

"The air is carrying a lot of weight."

"The air is carrying a lot of weight?"

"We should give up smoking." Running two blocks leaves me winded.

"But I like to smoke," Jane says, taking a big drag on her Winston.

"I've got to get free of them." I remove the ten remaining cigarettes from the flip-top box, and return them to the box broken.

"What a sickening sight," she says, blowing a perfect smoke ring.

"It's the only way. I can't just cut down."

"The next thing you'll want to give up is sex," she says.

"We should talk about that, too."

"Oh, no." She clasps her hands to her head in mock horror.

"What I've been thinking is that maybe we should meet outdoors."

"We are outdoors." In fact we are in the gazebo outside Hamilton Hall, the site of my SAT shame.

"What I mean is that we should maybe stay out of the room. Do you know what I mean?"

"Not exactly," she says, coolly.

"I mean, we'll just feel better if we do it that way." How can I tell her that I am afraid of using her up and rendering her unsuitable for Mary Marie and Cathy Cathleen if we keep going to the room? How painful to think she might find herself outside the circle of respectability because of me.

"We'll feel better if we stay away from your room?"

"We are in deep water. We have to get back to shore. Do you really want to drown?"

"Are you all right?"

"I am being purposeful."

"Purposeful. Of course. That explains everything," she hoots.

My spirits are rising; not even the stifling August heat can bring me low. Free of the room, Jane and I go to movies and do all the things that normal people do so renewal can have its place in our lives. And when Jane says, over sodas at the Turk's coffee shop, that

a couple of girls from her Friday night social group at the church have called her up and want to get together, I think, "Take that, Mary Marie. Take that, Cathy Cathleen, take that, all you who would shun Jane," as she drains the last of a cherry coke from the crushed ice in the glass.

And now that light has pierced the darkness, I suddenly say, "Let's go up to my room."

"I thought your room was off limits."

"Oh, it'll be all right."

She laughs, and laughs even more when I reach for the pack of cigarettes she has placed on the table. "One, just one," I say, hearing my father say the same thing as he reaches for the sugar bowl over Momma's protest.

Some minutes later I am tossing her clothes on a chair and lying naked on the bed.

"Do you still remember how?"

"Some things you don't forget," I say.

When I enter her, she whispers, "Slower."

Afterward I lie on my back, saying nothing.

"Are you all right?"

"Sure."

"You look sick."

"No, I'm fine. It's just hot in here. Let's get out." The feeling of suffocation has returned. Everything we had gained we have now lost.

We stay away from the room for two days and then go back. We stay away for three days,

and then go back. Each time the same pain returns.

“I have a plan,” I say.

“Oh, good. I can’t wait to hear it,” Jane replies.

If there is a note of sarcasm in her voice, I try to ignore it. “We need to decide on how long we can be together each day. Maybe two hours maximum. Does that sound about right?”

“We should place a maximum on how much time we spend together?”

“Sure. That way we don’t overdo a good thing and wind up back in the room, because then we would have to start all over again?”

“You’re not making a lot of sense.”

“We” start right now. That way all the good feeling will come back. You’ll see.”

“Good feeling?”

“OK. I’m going now. I think I’ll see a movie down on Ninety-sixth Street,” I say.

“That sounds nice.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe I’ll go home and clean up my room. That sometimes pacifies my dear old tipsy mother.”

“You’re not sure?”

“Sure of what?”

“That you’ll go home.”

“How sure do I have to be?”

“I’ll call you later. Okay?”

“Fine. Call me.”

“What? I shouldn’t call?”

“When do you not call?”

“So I shouldn’t call? That’s what you’re saying?”

“I’m not saying anything. You’re wearing me out. Just go.”

“I said I was going.”

“Saying is not doing. Now go.”

“I am.”

“Look, if you’re not going, I’m going. Bye. And don’t follow me.”

As I head down Broadway, it is everything not to rush back and clarify things with her so she will understand how much I love her and how bright our future can be.

On the radio the Crystals are singing "He's a Rebel" in some pizza shop I stop at along the way. No soaring with the music and three-minute fantasy of being idol of all mankind for me. I am just a bag of bones who has failed his SAT. I deposit the greasy slice, half-eaten, in a garbage can.

In the theater, a half hour passes on the illuminated wall clock above the exit door. The cool air and brief time away from Jane have brightened my outlook, and soon I am out of my chair and in a phone booth.

Mrs. Thayer answers. "No, my sweet. I'm afraid the object of your affections is not presently present."

Once again the distance that had been gained has been lost. Worse, it cannot start again without my first speaking with her. And the wall clock is not cooperating. In fact, it is being viciously balky, the minute hand barely moving. But a solution exists to the clock’s vicious dilly-dallying. If I walk slowly back to the phone booth and dial her

number, the right amount of time will have gone by. I don't have to just sit there in my seat and be a complete slave to monstrous time.

"Oh honey, your voice sounds so full of yearning. Where can she be that she is not here for you? How cruel. What torment young lovers put each other through."

When finally I reach Jane, I explode, as if she has purposely been frustrating me. Then I slam the phone into the cradle, which requires that I call back and apologize and then call again to be sure she has accepted the apology.

Coney Island is not my bedroom. It has ocean freedom and it has rides. We take the BMT down to the end of Brooklyn and ride the Cyclone and the even larger Tornado. The cogwheel pulls the car to the top of the track, and as it plunges Jane screams her excitement into the hot summer air. We get dizzy on the Whip, our bodies pressed against the perforated metal wall like laundry whirled about in an extractor, smash into each other in electric-powered bumper cars, and go around and around on the carousel, Sousa marches and Strauss waltzes blaring in our ears.

In the afternoon we hit the beach. The sun-worshipping throng do not rise up off their towels and point their fingers in laughing amazement. Nor does Jane run for the comfort of a boy with more substantial flesh upon his frame. Nor are there sideways glances or nods of friends to each other to catch the sorry spectacle in front of them. I can say this with some certainty, as my vigilance equipment is now operating full-time.

As I lie slathered in suntan lotion, a red-hued image hotter than the sand of Jane naked back in the room forms in my mind.

We wear our wet suits under our clothes on the subway back to Manhattan, the

sand grinding into their bottoms on the rattan seats.

“Can I come over and shower at your place?” Jane asks.

We shower together in the public bathroom down the hall. As she begins to dress, I touch her wrist.

“Has fucking time finally arrived?” Jane laughs.

But no sooner has new pain found me than something miraculous comes along, and it's right there in the show business column of the *Daily News*. Two film stars who divorced some years before are now, ten years later and after numerous other involvements, planning their remarriage. Propelled by joy, I fly downstairs to phone Jane with the news that the reunited couple have destroyed the pompous Frenchman. They have taken his maxim and sliced it in two with their sword of life.

"Jane, listen. It's incredible. Do you know what I just read?"

"Gideon, do you know what time it is?"

The hour hand on the Coca-Cola clock on the wall of the luncheonette is approaching midnight. “Sure, but this is about two famous people and how.....”

"It's a little late to be calling about famous people or anyone else."

"But look..."

"No. No looking. No anything."

Like a thief the morning has stolen my elation, but the bright lights of spotless Chock Full O' Nuts promise its return. And yet, two cups of coffee and a half-eaten sugar doughnut later while sitting on a stool at the counter, the darkness is still with me. Now

Riverside Park calls, and as I walk and walk its footpaths, another idea comes to me, filling me once again with happiness and hope, as I head for St. Lukje's Hospital.

"Well, what is it?" the emergency room receptionist asks. She was a young Negro woman and wore a white uniform.

"I need to see a doctor right away."

"What's the problem?" She is young and Negro, her tone challenging.

"That's what I want him to tell me. And I want him to tell me to my face, as that is the only way." The doctor will understand. They always do. I will spare Clovis Leachman and save my explanation for him.

She casts a studying eye on me before attaching a form to a clipboard. "Maybe you could give me your name."

"Gideon," I say.

"Do you have a last name?"

"Garatdjian." Like a place you park a car, I make the first part of it sound like.

"Take a seat."

A girl holding her hand to her bloody mouth and moaning struggles down the corridor after hearing her name over the PA system. A man with sunken cheeks and the wheeze of an asthmatic sits in a stupor in one of the molded plastic chairs. Soon he too disappears. Some minutes later, I am called to a windowless, fluorescent-lighted room, where an intern in a lab coat, clipboard in hand, directs me to sit on the adjustable bed.

"What seems to be the problem?" He is young and slight, with a bulging brow, and wispy blond hair.

"I've been seeing this girl. Her name is Jane Thayer. We started sleeping together

because someday we will be getting married. It was just like that song by the Crystals. You know the one I mean, that makes you feel so good all over you're practically delirious. Today I met the boy I'm gonna marry, only it was today I met Jane Thayer, the girl I'm gonna marry. What I need to know is whether it can be like we just met all over again if we stop sleeping together? La Rochefoucauld said we couldn't, but I am frankly tired of that man."

The intern says nothing. His eyes are ice blue.

"What I mean is, is there future time for us?" My words are not carrying. They travel a bit and then fall to the ground like stricken little birds.

The intern breaks his silence. "I suspect these things work themselves out."

"These things?"

But the intern has already moved toward the door, which he holds open for me.

Men and women of quiet purpose walk about the courtyard of the Jewish Theological Seminary, paying little attention to Jane and me as we sit on a bench in the entranceway. Lights burn in the buildings. Even on a summer evening there is work to be done. From Broadway comes the rumble of a subway train breaking free from or racing into the tunnel.

"Don't cry. I talked to Daddy. He said it was all right with him if we got married when we finish high school," Jane says.

Married? Married? Going to the chapel and we're going to get married?

"Garatdjian? What kind of name is that?"

"Garatdjian? It's an Armenian name. It has sticks and stones embedded within it. You've heard of the Armenians, of the rats' blood in our veins?" I shout, in a loud, shrill voice, standing naked in the living room of an equally naked man.

"Oh yes, I've heard a lot about you people," the man says, seeking to enter the spirit of the conversation and flashing a wicked smile.

"Liar. Filthy, filthy liar," I say, offering my glass for a refill.

Times Square. Fifth Avenue. Grand Central. Vernon-Jackson Boulevard. The subway clatters from the tunnel onto the el. Far below I stare, with mounting nausea, at the sprawl of the Penn Central railroad yard, the tracks an intricate web of silver tendrils. Across the river stands Manhattan, the needle of the Empire State Building reaching for the bruised sky.

"Hey, fuck you, you fat fuck. Why do you have to take up so much space?" Kevin squeals, Scully having squished him against the end rail. His smallness is his wound but also his protection.

The boys, some of them, are feeling rowdy tonight.

By the time we reach the Willets Point Station on the Flushing-bound train, the throbbing weight of jets arriving and departing from LaGuardia can be felt overhead. What is that world they are going to and coming from?

Jimmy Riley, Rob Koley, Scully, Kevin, Luis. If I am with my own sex, maybe I will know peace.

Outside the stadium Scully starts in. "Did I tell you guys about Flathead here? He's going all crazy because he's been sticking his dick in Jane. He's asking me all this

weird shit about the future, so I slapped him and he didn't do shit when I did."

I punch Scully as hard as I can, right in the mouth. Scully spits out some blood and sighs with pleasure before his face turns red with rage and he rushes his fatness at me. Once more my fist finds his face, this time his right eye, before crushing me into the asphalt with his huge weight and pounding away until Luis and the others pull him off.

"The next time I fucking kill you," he blubbers, the restraints holding.

The basement-dwelling Mets have Galen Cisco. They have fat Jack Fisher. They have pokey Chris Cannizzaro behind the plate. They have hands of stone Ed Kraneool at first base. But the Cardinals are redbirds on the fly. They have fleet Curt Flood and fleet Lou Brock and the haughty power of Ken Boyer. And they have the power pitching of Bob Gibson. By the third inning they are putting it to the patsy Mets.

The stadium is a bowl of pastel-colored seats. From the top of the grandstand, the players appear as specks on the brilliantly lighted field. A steady wind has begun to whip in off Flushing Bay, adding to my yearning for flight. Though the game is an agony of slowly passing innings, I stay in place, having made of the evening an endurance test and vaguely decided that failure will bring harm to Jane and me.

But now another idea has come, dissolving all the stress and gloom and lifting me once more into the realm of happiness as a vendor hollers, "Beer, ice cold beer" and tissue-thin hot dog wrappings are blown through the air.

"I need to find the bathroom," I say, as everyone stands for the seventh inning stretch.

"You do that, Champ." Luis's voice sounds cold, dismissive, reinforcing the sense that I have been a stranger among them since I didn't respond to their call up to my

window that first night I was alone with Jane in my room. Free of their judgmental eye after descending the concrete steps, I streak onto the exit ramp and out of the stadium and onto a subway home, leaving them to their ballpark franks and hearing myself say, "If you ever touch me again, I'll whip you to death with a car aerial. I'll cut your fucking throat. I'll burn you in your bed and say it never happened."

On the other side of the door a radio plays, one of those talk shows that go on into all hours of the night. I knock softly, and then harder. A lock turns and the door opens as far as the chain allows. An old woman peers out through the small opening. I stare down at the pink scalp showing through the thinning white hair and wait as she puts on the glasses looped around her wrinkled neck. This is crazy, I think.

"What's wrong with your face?" I have been there several times before with Jane.

"It's nothing. The neighborhood bully doesn't like me. I need to speak with you," he said.

"Well, come on in then," she says, unlatching the chain and opening the door wide.

The air in the room feels damp, as if she has just run a bath. I sit in a stuffed chair while she lowers the volume on the radio and pours herself a glass of carrot juice.

"My nightcap," she says, sitting opposite me. "What can I do for you?"

The visit had seemed like a good idea. I would unburden myself as she listened sympathetically and she would respond with wise counsel and comfort and somehow make things right. But now, her hard stare, the bluntness of her question, and the silence that follow all conspire to make me squirm, the unventilated room no more hospitable to

confession than the pitilessly impersonal examination room at the nearby hospital where I had sat with the young doctor.

“Well?”

“I—I mean Jane and I—have been doing something.”

“I’m listening.”

“We started...it got serious...for a year it has been serious.”

“What has been serious?”

“Sex. The seriousness of sex.” I try to leave it there, but can’t. “All the way. That kind of serious. Now I don’t know how to make her new. I don’t know how to make her white, like Mary Marie and Cathy Cathleen.”

“Like who?”

“They’re sisters. They don’t go all the way.”

Her face has a slight tremor that I now associate with the pent-up Gallic fury of Mlle. Gallimard, my former French teacher.

“I’ve said it before. God made the small town and the devil made the big city.”

“Do you think so?” I ask. The city is all I know.

“You see that door behind you?”

“Yes.” I have no need to turn. I know where the door is.

“Well, you came in it. Now I guess it's time you went out it.”

She isn’t Momma. She isn’t the forgiving kind. I run from her aged steel out into the night.

“I received a call from Miss Redding at the Claremont School. They will be only too

happy to have you back. Miss Redding told me so. She seems like such a nice woman, and she's very fond of you," Momma says.

It is a door I hadn't expected to reopen, and walking through it will bring pain, now that the dream of excellence has died. After all, I ran away when the going got tough. But I miss the comfort that association with quality can bring, along with all the social terror.

"Hey, Garatdj, you're back," Freddy Snyder shouts, that first day.

"Call him Hot Lips. Right, Garatdj?" Lance winks and smiles at me.

"What's that about Hot Lips?" Frank says, but Lance has danced away.

I show myself as even more self-effacing, if that is possible. All along Claremont has been putting me in my place. That much I see. The boy who inscribed the boastful pronouncement "Gideon is great" in his seventh grade textbook is now a cowering shell. Sean has beaten me. Tom Smits has beaten me. The SAT has beaten me. My own mind has beaten me. But defeat is not the same as surrender. It does not mean that the longing is not still there to replace the voice of failure that monopolizes my thoughts with the voice of success.

The chemistry course, which I need to graduate, is taught by James Jane, a tall, middle-aged man with receding gray hair, a furrowed Beethovenian brow, and a large belly that requires him to leave his suit jacket unbuttoned. Diane Coleman is heard to say he looks like Rex Harrison and that she would be his Liza Doolittle any day.

In addition to a thick chemistry book, James Jane assigns the class a slender volume titled *The Two Cultures*, by C. P. Snow. Both the author and he, Mr. Jane says, are

interested in building a bridge between science and the humanities. His almond eyes shine with good humor as he talks, in a casual, elliptical way, with one hand in the pocket of his wool trousers. For all his intelligence, he is seen as a man in the process of slow disintegration: the redness of his nose and the smell of liquor on his breath say more than any words he speaks.

The chemistry book is terrifying, the information on its glossy white pages an unfathomable mystery, from ions and moles to valences. Sitting in my room with the gooseneck lamp trained on the text, I wonder how long this humiliation will have to last, and if there is someplace in the world for kids as dumb as me.

Frank Furr teaches junior English and also serves as the homeroom teacher for the senior class. He has pale skin, and though just out of Bowdoin College, only a remnant of blond hair. Like Miss Jacoby, he offers words of encouragement, drawing on his own experience. "My guidance counselor back in high school told me I wasn't college material," Mr. Frank Furr says that first week, sitting on the edge of a desk. He passes on this information as if his presence on the Claremont faculty has somehow proven the counselor wrong.

But suspicion, haven't been aroused by the confession, now lingers, at least in me. What was Frank Furr missing that made the counselor say what he did? Had the counselor seen that Frank Furr just a low number guy? And why hadn't Frank Furr listened? What right did he have not to? Why hadn't he just stopped and gone belly up on the world, the way you were supposed to do if a guidance counselor said those words to you?

Frank Furr wears gingham shirts with his tweed and corduroy jackets. He is not to be seen in a white oxford shirt, as such plainness goes against the identity he is seeking to establish. He lets it be known that he has a wife and is pursuing a master's degree in English literature at New York University (New York University, not Columbia). This much I understand—Frank Furr is fighting the verdict that he is not top-shelf.

One morning a white-haired guest speaker addresses the student assembly. Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona has defeated Governor William Scranton of Pennsylvania for the Republican nomination for president of the United States. The man tells the student body why Barry Goldwater would be good for the country.

"This man is a patriot. He believes in America and stands up for this country of ours at a time when it is fashionable to be always pointing out our faults. This man is a great crusader for the American way and a relentless foe of world communism. He has his eye on the evil around us and will deal with it forthrightly." He goes on in this way, holding high the banner of Republicanism, the party of brand-name goods, saying not a single good thing about Lyndon Baines Johnson, the biggest Democrat of all, because to be a Democrat is to be an anarchist and to rob the country of what made America America in the first place.

Frank Furr, in the question-and-answer period, has no question but he does have an answer, declaring, "This man Goldwater is a lunatic, an American nightmare. He is warmongering, self-righteous, devoid of compassion. His America uber alles approach will drag us down the path of destruction." So Frank Furr speaks, causing a buzz in the assembly room. Afterward Mr. Arbuckle swings into action, taking Frank Furr aside to castigate him for his loose-tongued ways.

But where does a person turn in regard to Frank Furr's salvo? Does he not recognize the brand-name hegemony of the Republican Party—what Grant's Tomb with its Republican deceased means, or what the Civil War with its Republican president had been? Does he not understand the confusion in my mind in regard to Barry Goldwater and what a Republican now means?

"Laddie, it will be for you to have many girls in your life, I will allow myself to think," the doctor's Scottish assistant says, having seen me with Jane Thayer many times from the window of the doctor's ground-floor office. She speaks with luster on her tongue, her words lighting me up in a way that does not feel good.

"I guess," I say.

"Guess nothing, laddie. Be brave and go out in the world and take what is yours. The doctor will be with you shortly." Every word Beatrice speaks has the torque of her high energy.

Dr. Pfeffer's waiting room is where you can know a sweet peace amid the *National Geographic* and the gentle Golden Retriever and the wandering cats. Dr. Pfeffer has seen enough to speak in a slow and measured way. He is Jewish and he is chosen, having risen above all the quotas set up against innate excellence to graduate from Townsend Harris High School on the border of Harlem in New York City and go on to Cornell University. He has seen the exterminating angels on the European continent and knows that poisoned minds are what the world is possibly about. With that understanding does he take his pleasures simple, life being but the thing in front of him and for the living; he leaves the dead to their own devices.

What Dr. Pfeffer sees he doesn't always say, having wisdom to apply as a brake on his tongue. In the long ago, he made house calls on Naomi and Rachel, prompting their wild and laughing insistence on his lewd intent. That my sisters Naomi and Rachel should have thought a man like Dr. Pfeffer would be drawn to them. But not Hannah. She ran silent in the matter of Dr. Pfeffer.

Dr. Pfeffer walks a solitary path, with wives discarded along the way. If he needs warmth, he has his pets and Bernice.

"Momma says I am to ask you if there is something you can give my brother-in-law to help with his drinking," I say, when finally I get to see the doctor. Chuck has been on a long bender and passed out in the lobby the other day.

"Has he tried arsenic?"

"Arsenic?" I ask.

But the doctor is focused on the prescription he writes out with his fountain pen.

Some years ago, when a car backed into Luke and injured his knee, Luke asked Dr. Pfeffer how bad the injury was. "How bad does it have to be?" the doctor replied.

"You've got a good pair of eyes and a good set of shoulders. You should join the Air Force," Dr. Pfeffer now says, tearing the prescription free from the pad and handing it to me.

Air Force? Air Force? Johnny Andrews, the Negro boy from down the block, with whom Luke and I went to Ebbets Field, is dead. His helicopter crashed and burned in Vietnam and now his mother dresses in black and holds her silence, a blasting sound in my ears when we pass. And his grandfather, with his old and leathery face, has a silence of his

own aimed at all ears with the capacity for hearing. My boy is dead and you're alive, their silence says.

We are not through with Dr. Pfeffer. A cut on the sole of my father's foot has become infected, and now gangrene has set in and spread. Dr. Pfeffer says immediate hospitalization and amputation will be required.

"Can it not wait for my Medicare coverage to take effect?" my father asks, referring to the government program that Lyndon Baines Johnson has given the country.

"It can wait, but you can't," Dr. Pfeffer says.

Momma strikes a tone of exasperation when we are alone. "Has he not been told a hundred times that he must take care of cuts properly?"

"How much of his leg will he lose?" I ask.

"Never mind that. The Lord will provide. But you must promise me to visit him in the hospital. You must."

Momma's prod summons anger, as if she is sending me out on an unnecessary errand to the store. My father is more a stranger than ever, making our times alone difficult if not excruciating. And I hear scorn, the workings of mockery in my own mind. My father has a gangrenous foot and he is asking if he can wait? If he can *wait*?

My father lies in an adjustable bed. A curtain separates him from the other patient in the room, an old woman with a tube in her nose who stares at me with eyes of death. When my father's face seems to break apart in a smile, all I see is decay: the sallow skin, the mess of metal the inside of his mouth has become; the thicket of hairs protruding from his

big ears; the bony, striated breastplate exposed by his half-open hospital gown.

"You are my good boy. You have always been my good boy," he says, after I have kissed his unshaven cheek. *Why callest thou me good?* That word, so paralyzing.

A nurse arrives to remove the food tray, placing the big metal cover back over the half-eaten serving of chicken and mixed vegetables. "You have to eat more. You're a growing boy," she says to my father, in a strong commanding voice, the voice of one who is still on this side of life.

"A what?" he says.

"You need your strength," she replies, perhaps sensing that "growing boy" is not the thing to say to a sixty-five-year-old man.

"I will show you what they have done," he says, after the nurse has left, and pulls back the sheet that has been covering his lower body. His entire lower leg and knee have been removed. My father smiles proudly at the surgeon's handiwork as he stares down at the liver-brown stump. The wave of revulsion coursing through me goes undetected by him. "When it has sufficiently healed, they will fit me for a prosthesis," he says, calmly.

"Are you in pain?"

"Pain? What is that? I am waiting for God, my son. How much pain can I be in? Your mother and I will be in heaven together. In heaven. If you could only imagine such a thing. Will she be coming tonight?"

"I think so," I say. Actually, I have no idea, but those are words he does not need to hear.

Sean found himself a summer love that has carried into the fall. Johnny Joye fills his

clothes so well that his name is shouted out on all the avenues where he is seen to strut. He does his business on the street and in penthouse suites and on island retreats as well. He does not show up in jeans or Keds but only in the finest threads and footwear, including slacks that suggest where he is built the most.

New songs are playing—"She Loves You" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand." Immediate surrender is called for when I hear them blaring from Lenny Cerone's Bonneville double-parked in front of the luncheonette. Coincidental with their sound is my first sighting of Johnny Joye in a short-waisted and collarless jacket of Christmas red, the outfit made more remarkable by the fact that the same one is being worn by his running buddy, Louie Love, as if they were one half of the Fab Four.

In this time a woman has also come into Sean's life, as if he willed her into being and directed her to his checkout line at the GoobleGood. Because she tends to fumble in her pocketbook for her purse and then searches for her glasses to inspect the bill, some of the checkers groan when they see her on their line. But Sean is accommodating of her dawdling ways. He gives her no gruffness, and takes extra care when bagging her groceries instead of dropping big cans of V-8 juice on her eggs or mashing her tomatoes under cans of Crisco oil.

"You are a real polite young man. They don't make so many of them like you anymore," she says, commending him in a loud, raspy voice that carries to the farthest aisles in the store.

Soon he is personally delivering boxes of groceries to Mrs. Louise Dinker, who lives just around the corner from Scully's stoop in a building with an intercom. Over tea and cake, he learns that her husband, a Wall Street stockbroker, died five years before.

Vistiors are few, Sean suspects, seeing the dust that has settled on the surfaces. But

"Friendly is the love of my life. We talk all the time, don't we?" Mrs. Dinker says, turning to the parrot in the large cage.

And Friendly replies, "You're the best. You're the best."

On his third errand, Mrs. Dinker says, "My husband was an older man when we met. He had an eye out for younger women. That's why he chose me."

Sean stays for a while, and as he is leaving, reaches into her bag for a twenty. "This is my tip. I'm an American boy. I have to get ahead, right?" he says, showing her a malevolent grin.

On subsequent visits he continues with his material theme, saying, "What's yours is mine. What's mine is yours. When love comes in the window, you share and share alike." And then he sings for her, turning to his Frank Sinatra repertoire for "Paris in Springtime."

He drains her savings account. He pawns her diamond ring. He badgers her to sell shares of stocks.

"Now I've got some class. You know what class is, boy?" In this way does he address me, using a word that clanks with stupidity and non-class. He has bought top-of-the-line Samsonite luggage for his steady, Johnny Joye, and himself, and together they fly to other American cities—Atlanta and Detroit and Chicago and San Francisco—in search of sex and bright lights and gambling, getting bombed on the booze in those miniature airline bottles. And everywhere they go, Sean shows his class with a fat tip.

A deficiency in class is his one complaint about his steady. "Sometimes he doesn't show me any. We were in Miami a few days ago for an all-weekend party in the

best part of the city. There were all these sharply dressed men, right? All these guys with class? And he goes off with the first drooling slobbola to show him any attention. Now that shows me something."

The world continues spinning on its axis that fall, and Sean continues to be born into the life he has willed for himself, and I can only hope the thin smile I wear hides the giant chasm between us when Sean screams, in a laughing blast of malice from hell, "I killed that bitch's bird. I killed that fucking bird dead, Jim."

When I see my classmates studying the now familiar-looking SAT booklets in the school hallways, I hurry to the office, fearful that mine might fall into someone else's hands. Miss Redding reaches down into the box at her feet and reads the numbers before handing me the booklet. "Don't tell me you can't do well on these tests," she says, giving me some hope that I have improved.

I find an empty classroom and remove my hand from the numbers slowly, going backward digit by digit. The achievement test numbers are acceptable and I have come up in the English portion of the aptitude test. The math part is a different story; I have fallen even lower. You get 200 points for signing your name. What kind of cretin am I? Once again, my inadequacy is there in front of me to see.

Tom is standing in the doorway, as if he had been patrolling the school in search of me.

"How'd you do?"

"Okay," I say, and walk past him.

Robin Abel is ecstatic. "I was so ashamed after the PSAT last year. I didn't want

to tell anyone how badly I had done. I almost died," she says openly, to a few friends. It is all different now. The stigma has been erased. She has scored over 1300 and will probably be going to Wellesley, her first choice.

In French class, Mlle. Gallimard stops at each student's desk and asks to see the test results. "Tres bon, Robin," she says. "Vous êtes une etudiant merveilleux," she says to Ogden Connifer, blasé about his 800 score on the verbal part and on the French achievement test. After looking at my booklet, she drops it on my desk and shakes her head, something more than her normal quiver. She expects her students to score at least 700 and I have missed fallen slightly below the mark. I do some smiling for the class to show I am not affected.

The next morning Tom catches the number 4 bus just as it is pulling away from the stop at One Hundred Tenth Street. I cower as he pushes his way to the back, where I stand, remembering his probing from the day before. Evidently I have underestimated the depth of his curiosity. "I asked Miss Redding for your board scores, and she told me."

"You did?"

"I really envy your scores. They're astronomical."

"Thanks," I say, having no defense against Tom's lacerating irony.

"You'll be great as the starting forward for Slippery Rock next fall. To tell you the truth, even Slippery Rock may not want you. Mr. Sadowski left the draft of a 'To Whom It May Concern' letter about your 'tremendous potential' on his desk yesterday. He dropped the 'o' in the first word and substituted an 's' for a 't' in the second word. That should impress the officers at Slippery Rock College, unless they can't spell either."

If he has taken a knife and ripped me open, that doesn't mean I have to die.

That afternoon I have an appointment with Mr. Horst-Lehman, who also serves as the college guidance counselor. Miss Redding places a manila folder on his desk. Mr. Horst-Lehman spends a minute looking over the contents through his bifocals before tossing the folder onto a pile on his cluttered desk.

"Have you given any thought to where you might like to go to college?" He presses his hands together and rests his bulbous nose against his fingertips. I have not spoken to him since returning to the school.

I mention three highly selective colleges, one in upstate New York, the other in Connecticut, and the third in Pennsylvania, that aren't impossibly far from the city. And maybe there will be a place for me on their basketball teams.

"An applicant with your class ranking might stand a chance, but your SAT scores are insufficient. Maybe you would consider these other schools." He mentions Muhlenberg, Franklin and Marshall, and Colby. And yes, Slippery Rock.

"Thank you," I say.

"We have to know our place in life. That is essential if we are to be happy in this world."

I nod, not knowing what to say.

"Do you remember the Glendocia boy, who played the trumpet so beautifully at the tabernacle?" Around Momma is an aura of gentleness, more than her white robe alone can provide. The softness of Momma. The hardness of my father. Between these two poles do I exist.

"Sure," I say, picturing a fat-lipped boy with a crown of hair as golden as the

trumpet on which he played solos for the congregation, and the velvet-lined case in which he kept his mouthpieces. Some kind of hierarchy existed, even at the church. The boy's father had been one of the officers. That had counted for something. The sense that the boy and his father were in and Momma and I were out.

"He is now out at a Bible college in Oklahoma. It would do my heart so much good to see you do the same."

I try to imagine the school's basketball team. Do they kneel and pray during timeouts? Would Oral Roberts be watching from the stands?

"Do we have any money for college?"

"The Lord will provide."

"College costs more than the Claremont School." I don't say that colleges cost a lot more, according to the guidebooks that I have read.

"Is that so? It is that expensive?"

It isn't the family way to talk about money. A feeling of shame comes over me. Momma looks so old and careworn. I have no right to ask her for anything.

And I don't have to ask Momma for anything. I will create a college scholarship fund of my own.

Momma's massive keyring lies on a pile of bedding just outside the laundry room, in which she and Auntie Eve are feeding sheets into the mangle. The roar of the extractor is no more than the roar of terror in my head as I search for and then remove two keys, stamped A1 and A2, from the ring and fly through a back alley to the hardware store on the next block, where the clerk clamps one, then the other, key in the machine along with

blanks for duplication. My terror grows as I return through the same alleyway to the basement. It is one thing to remove the keys from Momma's ring, but another to reinsert them on the ring in their proper order and without detection. And suppose Momma has taken the keyring and left the laundry room? But no, there the keyring lies, and there Momma is, still at her mangle post with Auntie Eve. How I manage to steady my nerves sufficient to reattach the keys to the ring and in their correct places I can't say.

In the long ago I went to Auntie Eve's apartment, and then I stopped. But now, in the stillness of a Sunday morning, with a church bell pealing, I once again find myself trailing after Auntie Eve in her black hat and veil down to the subway entrance at One Hundred Tenth Street before turning back.

As I remembered, envelopes stuffed with bills are still there on the floor of her locked closet between her pairs of shoes. To avoid detection, I take a twenty from each of the three envelopes, while my ears remain pricked for footsteps in the lobby. The orange rolls of quarters and green rolls of dimes I leave alone.

The portrait of a bearded Jesus with shoulder-length brown hair still hangs in the living room. Wherever I position myself in the room, his eyes seem to find me.

That morning, standing over the bathroom sink, I probe a molar with the tip of my tongue. Dr. Draver, the neighborhood dentist Momma recommended, began a root canal the week before. I brush around the lower right side of my mouth gingerly, as if the tooth is a rickety construction. Rinsing my mouth, I feel no pain. Maybe what Dr. Draver said is true and I will be all right for the weekend.

Dr. Draver says I have an irrational fear of the drill. She laughs that I will break the armrests with the grip I place on them. “You are too young to be having so much trouble with your teeth and will have to learn to trust,” she said at our last session, with some crossness in her voice. But trust what, the drill not to find the nerve that would electrify his body with pain a thousand times worse than biting down on tinfoil?

A compact metal sterilizer stands on the shelf below the mirror. The water has begun to boil in the little contraption that holds my father’s insulin needle. Does he not know the danger of an electrical appliance so close to water?

There came a knock on the door as he began to wash his face.

“Please, my son, I must come in. Do you not see that I am busy?” The sound of my father’s impatient voice tears me from the cracked mirror. I quickly rinse my face and dry it on the sour-smelling towel.

“You must think, my son. You are not purposely trying to aggravate me, are you?”

“No,” I say.

Some weeks have passed since the surgery and now he hobbled about in the small and cluttered apartment with a prosthesis and a walker.

“I need you to be my good son,” his father said.

“Yes,” Mark said, vacating the small bathroom so his father could enter.

Momma is at the breakfast table, pouring heavy cream into her coffee. With her free hand she whisks away a roach scurrying over the oilskin tablecloth.

“This friend of yours? Is he from a Christian family?” Momma asks.

“I don’t know.” It seems a better answer than to say I do not think so, or that they absolutely aren’t.

“They must be very wealthy to have a house in the country,” Momma says.

“I guess.”

“And what is it your friend’s father does?”

“He is a university professor.”

“Is that right? And what does he teach?”

“Art history, I think.”

“He must have a fine mind.”

“Yes.”

“And your friend’s mother. Is she of the world, too?”

World. As in worldly. As in sinner.

“She is studying for a doctorate.”

“A doctorate. What is that?”

“Some kind of degree you get after you have gone to college.”

“Then she must have a very fine mind, too.”

“Yes. I guess,” I say, buttering my toast and trying to eat on one side of his mouth.

“Your father has a fine mind. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“He can speak five languages.”

“Yes.”

Turning the corner onto Riverside Drive, I see the doorman in his blue uniform with gold epaulets and a matching blue hat standing vigil in the brisk fall air. Why not just keep walking and spare myself a weekend of agony. Just keep it safe, the way it should be. Crossing lines was dangerous, like the line I crossed the summer following

sixth grade, drawn in spite of myself toward the skinny boy in shorts on the basketball court in the park.

“Where are you going?” the doorman said, as my feet turn me toward the lobby, seemingly against my own will.

“I’m going to see Tom.”

“Tom who?”

“Tom Smits.”

“What’s your name?”

“Mark. Mark Garatdjian.”

The doorman spoke into the intercom. “I’ve got a kid named Mark down here.” The doorman looked at me as he speaks. “OK. Go on up,” he says, as if I have gotten away with something.

The family forms a welcoming committee at the door of their apartment—Tom’s mother, tall and lanky and in her early forties, with an observant power in her formidably intelligent face; his pudgy and freckled younger sister Beth; and his father, whose red hair has mostly vanished from his shiny, well-shaped head.

Their smiles seemed to convey expectation as well as welcome, as if they are waiting for me to say something witty or clever. When I can only muster a shy “Hello,” they disperse. I have failed my first test.

Seeing the fine Oriental rug laid down on the sparkling parquet floor and the floor-to-ceiling walnut shelves lined with books serves as a reminder of the unbridgeable chasm between Tom and me.

"My father doesn't live with us anymore. He moved out six months ago. He has

his own apartment downtown," Tom says, out of earshot of his father, who has walked on ahead toward the car. The news of Tom's parents' separation is jarring, not at all the picture I held in my mind of Tom's family. And though it is shameful to acknowledge, a small measure of comfort comes to me to learn that things aren't perfect in my friend's world.

As the roomy station wagon speeds up the West Side Highway, I note the neighborhood landmarks—the railroad tunnel that runs under Riverside Park, the single spire of Riverside Church, Grant's Tomb, the pier at One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street, where poor old men dropped their fishing lines in the polluted water.. How often, as a child, I would stare at the cars rampaging along, and now he is himself in such a car, its power ushering him out of a very small world into something larger and grander. Some door is opening, and it would be exhilarating if not for my fear of Mr. Smits, who speaks in a peeved voice.

"Half the faculty signs a protest against our military involvement in Vietnam. A flock of bleating sheep. Not a single one of them questions what it might mean for the rest of Southeast Asia if we don't fight back." Mr. Smits bangs the wheel with his hand for emphasis. Mr. Smits's anger is frightening, even if it isn't yet directed at me.

"Sure, Dad. The next thing you know the Vietcong will be invading Australia with their sampans," Tom says, and grins at me, as if to say, What am I supposed to do about my reactionary father?

"You can believe that is so," Mr. Smits hisses, as I myself would have said, had he been able to find my voice. Aren't the Communists relentless? Has Tom forgotten the scenes on TV of the Hungarian Revolution, including people being crushed on the streets

by Soviet tanks for claiming their freedom? The Communists have some kind of mental as well as physical strength that those of the West lack. They have the power of their terrifying inevitability.

We stop at a restaurant in a small town on a twisting rural road. The leaves on the trees are turning—scarlet red and bright yellow and dull brown combinations of color on the oaks and maples and elms. The smell of burning wood follows us as our feet crunch the gravel in the parking lot in front of the restaurant.

"What a hell of an intellectual conversation this is," Mr. Smits roars, after listening to Tom and me talk about the upcoming professional basketball season. "When I was your age, I was discussing Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, not sports. I had read all their novels, could easily identify Beethoven's nine symphonies, and knew every Impressionist painting worth committing to memory and those that weren't." He raises his glass, signaling a refill of his bourbon and water to the waiter.

"All right, Dad." Tom's voice is conciliatory, as if he knows it is a dangerous time for sarcastic skepticism.

We arrive in the last light of day. A massive maple tree stands in front of the two-story white clapboard house and its screened-in porch. I settle into an old rocker by the hearth, transfixed by the fire that Tom has made, and leave only when Mr. Smits enters, as if we aren't meant to be alone in the same room together.

He had been given a small room at the top of the stairs, and as he unpacked his bag, he heard Mr. Smits down below say, "Tom, you and your friend get ready. We're going to the Baxters in about twenty minutes. There'll be a poker game going tonight."

Mark sat on the edge of the single bed. He was uncomfortable hearing himself

referred to by Tom's father in that way. "Your friend"—it sounded unfriendly. An hour before the house had seemed strange and new. Now it is familiar and safe. I want to stay behind the closed door and just lie on the bed with the pretty afghan over me. No more new things. No more.

A dull pain in the tooth starts on the short drive to the party. It has decided to turn on me. I stay back in the kitchen, with a view of a large round oak table in the living room where the men have gathered for their poker game. I keep my hand against my cheek, as if pressure alone can bring relief. From another world he listen now to the banter, the laughter growing louder as the level in the liquor bottles falls. Such easy intimacy these men and their intelligent wives have. Like his father, the men are professors, Tom explains, all of them on the faculty of the nearby college.

As the pain grows, so does my rage against Dr. Draver. How could the stupid woman let me go off to the country like this for the weekend? I can't wait to show her the proof of her incompetence.

"Did you see Bentley's wife?" Mr. Smits says to Tom, on the drive back.

"What about her?" Tom asks, sitting next to his father in the front seat.

"You get in bed with her and you'd better expect a ride."

Mr. Smits speaks as if the experience of riding Mrs. Bentley has been his.

"Dad," Tom says.

"Dad what?"

"I'm not exactly interested in Mrs. Bentley."

"Well, maybe your silent friend back there is."

The stench of alcohol fills the enclosed space.

“Dad, could you slow down just a little?” Mr. Smits has begun to navigate the curves at a terrifying speed.

“I’ll never slow down. It’s not my way,” Mr. Smits says.

That night I lie under the blankets with crushed aspirin between the gum and the tooth and fall asleep to the sound of an owl breaking the silence with irregular hooting.

In the morning I am made ravenously hungry by the smell of bacon frying downstairs in the kitchen. But to eat means running the risk of the beast being awakened. He dressed and some minutes later find Tom flipping through a copy of *Playboy* with exaggerated casualness. His father has gone off with the car into town, Tom says. Maybe he has gone to get a ride on Bentley's wife.

As if Tom has read my mind, he says, "My father uses this place as a real fucking pad. He brings his prettier students up here."

"How do you know?" With longing I watch Tom demolish his plateful of eggs and bacon.

"Little items, like a pair of panties, under the sofa. Definitely not my mother's, I'll tell you that."

It is painful to think that Mr. Smits has left Tom's mother because she isn't pretty enough anymore, or at least as pretty as the students he brings to his love pad. My own parents would never divorce. Pastor Cohn calls it a sin. "What God has joined, let no man rend asunder," he would thunder.

“Does your father know that you know?”

“I don't say anything. He has a temper, as you have seen. He once chased a motorist who had cut him off for twenty blocks through city traffic, ran him off the road, and got

into a fistfight.”

“Did he win?”

“He clobbered the guy.”

We walk to the top of a hill and a sweeping view of cultivated farmland dotted with red barns and white houses. In the crook of his arm Tom carries a rifle. "It's a .30-.30. My father goes deer hunting with it," he says, slipping a cartridge into the chamber.

We stop to rest at a low fieldstone wall. “You see that gray squirrel? There has been a war going on here for some time between the red squirrels and the gray squirrels. They can’t coexist. And the gray squirrels are winning. Their strategy is simple. They bite off the balls of the red squirrels so they can’t reproduce.”

I don’t know what to say. The strategy is so astonishingly violent and ruthless.

"You know, my sister and I have genius IQs. My father got this psychologist friend to test us when we were kids. He was the chubby guy wearing horn-rimmed glasses at the party last night. Probably he gave us a few breaks on the test, but we're smart all right." Tom squints through the scope at a crow flying over a silo.

“That’s great,” I say, a sense of menace building in me.

“Well, you can’t be stupid. I don’t have stupid friends,” Tom says.

Tom and his fractured family belong to this New England tableau of picturesque farms and rolling hills and faculty parties; they have simply taken their natural places here, like those gray squirrels.

The drive home takes us through quaint towns with tree-lined main streets and houses with white picket fences and churches with steeples. Mr. Smits has been mercifully absent for much of the weekend, but now, the sustained proximity in the

enclosed space of the station wagon seems to ensure that my luck has run out and I will have to engage with Tom's father. When our eyes meet fleetingly in the rearview mirror, it seems to confirm my fear.

"We'll have dinner now. Maybe afterward this damn traffic will have thinned," Mr. Smits says, referring to the stalled traffic on the interstate, the endless blur of taillights glowing red in the darkness that has fallen.

At another roadside restaurant, I bury my face in the oversize menu, seeking refuge from Mr. Smits, who sits opposite me in the tight booth. The waitress is slow to take our orders, and the food doesn't fly out of the kitchen once she does.

"Tom tells me that you have had a toothache on and off all weekend. Are you able to eat?" There is an asperity to Mr. Smits's tone as he sips his scotch.

"I'm kind of hungry."

"Your last name is Armenian. Do you eat Near Eastern food at home?"

Near Eastern. That means closer than Middle Eastern? That means Turkey and Iran and what is now Soviet Armenia? "No. Not really." I'm not prepared to tell Mr. Smits that my father doesn't speak about things Armenian, at least to me, and that the only trappings of Armenian culture is the large rug his father had once hung on the bedroom wall. An oppressive sight, but it had mercifully fallen down when the supports proved inadequate.

"And what do you eat?"

"My mother cooks chicken and leg of lamb and pot roast." Is it right to mention those foods? Are they acceptable? Will Mr. Smits laugh?

"Tom tells me you're rather secretive about where you live. Why is that?" he

continues, lifting his eyes from the bread he had been buttering to mine. "Don't you suppose my son should be able to know where one of his friends lives? After all, you know where he lives. It's the principle of reciprocity, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh come on, Dad." Tom sounds angry more than embarrassed.

"What's the matter? He seems able to speak. Why shouldn't I ask him a few questions?" Mr. Smits says, without taking his eyes off me. "So where do you live? Tell us."

"Between Broadway and Riverside Drive on One Hundred Twelfth Street."

"Is there a street address, or is mail just sent to 'Between Broadway and One Hundred Twelfth Street?'"

"Sure. There's a street address. 607 West One Hundred Twelfth Street," Mark said.

"Well now, that wasn't so painful, was it?" Mr. Smits popped a piece of buttered bread into his mouth and signaled the waitress for a refill of his bourbon. "And what is your father's occupation?"

"He's an accountant," I hear myself say.

"What's the name of his firm?"

"Garatkin," I blurt.

"Garatkin. Garatkin," he says, trying the name out. "Sounds like some kind of hybrid name. Your father must be a partner in the firm."

"Oh yes," I say, picturing my father sitting in his corner in the dining room reading literature from the evangelist Oral Roberts and devouring stinky cheese from the stash he keeps in that crumpled brown bag in the refrigerator.

I bite into the hamburger, too famished to resist.

Soon the ache returns, and becomes my companion for the rest of the trip.

"Where did you say you live?" Mr. Smits asks. We have reached One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street and Broadway. Above, a train rattles along the tracks of the el.

"One Hundred Twelfth Street, but you can leave me at One Hundred Sixteenth Street and Broadway."

With the car stopped at the light, Mr. Smits turns, his face ablaze and his eyes hard. "Why would you want me to do that?"

"My dentist is on that street. She lives where she has her office and I'm going to see her."

Mr. Smits returns his eyes to the road and drove on. "Of course. How perfectly clear. How silly of me to even ask. Your friend will be seeing his dentist at 9 p.m. on a Sunday night," Mr. Smits says, addressing himself to Tom.

I would flee, but my bag is in the trunk.

At One Hundred Sixteenth Street Mr. Smits pulls to the curb. Tom gets out with me and opens the trunk.

"My father, the Grand Inquisitor." Tom punches me playfully on the arm and gives a helpless shrug.

I tote my bag down the hill away from Broadway as they drive off, then pause in a doorway, fearful that Mr. Smits might double back and catch me in my lie. I will live with the pain another night and call Dr. Draver in the morning. Once again my mind floods with all the accusation I will hurl at the woman for not having taken care of me, for not giving me what I needed, for sending me out into the world in such painful disrepair.

"Well, this is it. Welcome to the Thayer residence," Jane says, with a theatrical sweep of her arm ushering me into her family's apartment. A musty smell. Cramped rooms. Worn and mismatched furniture. A faded rug on the living room floor and the unsightly bulge of the extension cords running under it. A sofa and armchair raked by the cat's claws. Dusty surfaces. Dirty windows.

A door to one of the bedrooms opens and her mother appears, one hand to her wrinkled neck and the other around a glass. "Hi there, Handsome. You don't mind if I call you handsome, do you? Jane never does. Ha ha. Do take off your coat and make yourself comfortable. It's not a Fifth Avenue duplex, but it will have to do, be it ever so humble and all that. Would you care for some cookies and coffee or tea?" Her black hair is streaked with gray and crow's feet show in the corners of her large green eyes.

"No. I am fine. Thank you," I say, dazed by her torrent of self-conscious words.

"Whoops. My competition is giving me the evil eye. Don't do anything I wouldn't do, sweethearts," she says, and withdraws to the room she came from. Jane taps the side of her head with an index finger and shrugs, as if to say, "What can I do?"

On and off I am still trying to keep Jane out of my room so she can be good as new, and so she has invited me to her apartment for the first time. But we aren't on the sofa for a minute before I have my hand up her skirt and she is unzipping my fly, both of us trying to muffle our groans of pleasure. Still, as I haven't entered her, I can leave believing that I am not using her up and the future is still ours to be in together.

As Christmas approaches, it's working. Redemption is underway. Jane has gone ice

skating at Wollman Rink, in Central Park, with Cathy Cathleen and Mary Marie and some of the guys from Scully's stoop, while I stay back in my room and try to study. Listen. She is being received by those untarnished Catholic girls who faithfully attend Sunday mass up at the Church of Notre Dame on Morningside Drive, as if she has been dropped into the big washing machine down in the basement and some deep sudsing action is going on to remove the stain of her involvement with me.

And now there is a knock at my door and she is here, in her knitted cap, her cheeks red from the cold and her white skates slung over her shoulder. What more proof do I need that she has some relationship to the world and had not been banished to drown in her own tears? What more proof do I need that we are ready for the room again and the privacy it affords us so we can resume going all the way?

There is a voice of true understanding and wise counsel it is not mine to hear at this point in my life, or if I do hear that voice, it is only to have it drowned out by fear and my capacity to live in the snare of illusion. It is the voice telling me this forbiddingly cold January day not to go where I do not belong, that there is no basis for believing I can gain admission to such a school, and that Mr. Horst-Lehman, despite his odiousness, is right—my transcript and my test scores, coupled with the reticence of my whole approach to the high school experience, has left me unqualified for admission, my credentials as light and flimsy as the body and mind I lived in.

Outside the darkness is still holding as in the mirror of the public bathroom down the hall from my room I inspect myself in my new Harris tweed jacket. How great it looked in the window of Albee's, down the block, a clothing store for college students.

But on me the jacket looks boxy, my reedy neck shooting out of it.

I leave the building wearing a beige trench coat and soon the soles of my oxblood-colored penny loafers are slapping against the floor of the concourse in Grand Central Station as I hurry to the gate to catch the 6:55 to Hartford.

As the train eases, squealing and groaning, into the tunnel, I think of the application I have submitted. Under "Interests," I put reading and sports, listing neither hobbies nor extracurricular activities other than basketball. No library committee, no yearbook committee, no assembly position. Being on a committee means other kids; it means staying after school instead of meeting Jane; it means the dullness of an interminable afternoon when the street is calling.

My mood brightens as the train emerges from the tunnel and gains speed, bypassing the One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street Station and streaking past the dilapidated buildings of Harlem into the outlying area. Well, the words will come. I will find something to tell the interviewer.

Some hours later I stand on the quadrangle enclosed by gothic, vine-covered buildings. Tall trees bare of leaves rise above them. On the crisscrossing paths an occasional student appears, the college having emptied out during the winter break. Inside the modern administration building, the corridors lined with bulletin boards, I enter through a door that says "Admissions." Inside, a young secretary with her blond hair in a bow interrupts her efficient typing to check the appointments calendar and asks me to take a seat.

A William Holden lookalike in a tailored suit, his Chesterfield coat folded neatly in the chair to his left, sits smoking a cigarette. My eyes are no match for the shrewdly

appraising stare of the older man and he looks away. When the door opens and a handsome kid in jacket and tie comes out, the man rises and puts his arm around him. The admissions officer follows. He could be a shirt ad model with his blond good looks.

"You and Jeff look around some more if you'd like, Mr. Gifford." The father waves as he and his son moves toward the door.

The secretary hands the admissions officer a folder and motioned with an upward nod of her head toward me.

"I'm Frank Graves," the officer says, crushing my hand in a powerful grip.

"Hi. I'm Mark Garatdjian," I say, seeing that the officer hadn't wanted to risk mispronouncing my last name.

"Tell me a little about yourself," the officer says. We have gone to his office, where he is now seated behind his desk with the folder open in front of him.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well, what are your interests? What kinds of things do you like to do?"

"I like to read. I like to play basketball, too." All the confidence that the easy motion of the train had provided has disappeared; I can think of no way to expand on the simple statement I have made. And Mr. Graves's steel-gray eyes are no help. Though the room is chilly, I can feel sweat beginning to dampen my shirt.

Mr. Graves presses on. "I see that you changed schools in your junior year, and then returned. Can you tell me about this?"

"Well, I needed to get away. I just couldn't stay there anymore." When Mr. Graves allows the silence to continue, I say, "I was having some difficulty."

"Difficulty?"

“Some difficulty with myself. That’s all it was. Somebody was doing better in basketball than me and my girlfriend, I didn’t know if we would ever be like new again, and homework was piling up.”

Mr. Graves leans back in his chair and relaxes his gaze. “This is an extremely selective college. We have a large number of strong applicants, even more than usual this year.”

“Yes, I understand,” I say.

“Thank you for coming,” Mr. Graves says, getting up from his desk and seeing me to the door.

I talk loudly to myself on the way to the train station to block out all thought. Whatever words come into my head I say, and sometimes not even words but just strings of syllables, as if inventing a language of my own, but without any of the feeling that Momma shows when she stands in the pew at the tabernacle and speaks in tongues. It suddenly seems like I am a long way from New York City, but soon I will be back.

The basketball season has been a good one. We won the league championship for the first time in years, and I emerged as the leading scorer. And despite the fact that I quit the team and then quit school the previous year, Mr. Sadowski remains in my corner. “You can play college ball. You just need to fill out a little more,” Mr. Sadowski says. Though I am touched by Mr. Sadowski’s faith in me, I am more inclined to see myself through Mr. Horst-Lehman’s dismissive eyes. What does it mean to succeed on the basketball court when you can’t hold your own in the classroom?

And now comes the news that Claremont will be playing a preliminary game

against Earl Academy at Madison Square Garden on a Saturday night. Fans settling into their seats will get to see two very average private school teams go at it prior to the Knicks game against the Philadelphia Warriors. If others see it as cause for elation, I am simply embarrassed by the thought of such exposure, imagining Richie Guerin and Willie Naulls and the other Knick players standing in the runway in their white warmup suits with orange and blue trim making jokes about the skinny white boys running up and down their court.

While my teammates invite family and friends, my secrecy about the event continues. A person knows when he is deserving and when he isn't deserving. A person knows when he is fit for exposure and when he isn't. As the event draws closer, I tell neither Jane nor my family. I do not need to grow my shame any bigger than it is. I do not need any more bad reflections on me than I have. I need for them to stay away from me and me from them so the night will not be worse than it has to be. It was for my family and Jane or someone to understand that it is humanly impossible to fit them into the seats of Madison Square Garden with all that is going on. I must be seen alone. Even if the Claremont School is going to Madison Square Garden, it is still the Claremont School, and the laughing things ("You went where with your family? You saw *Splendor in the Grass* with your family?) will be out in even greater force if I dare to show anything more of myself than my semi-nakedness in my basketball uniform.

Because my family isn't good enough. Because Jane Thayer isn't good enough. Because I am not good enough. Is it my fault if I know that, know that, know that?

One minute Mr. Sadowski and the team meet up under the big marquee on Eighth Avenue and Fiftieth Street and the next I am staring up at the empty rows of seats,

with here and there a few scattered pockets of relatives and friends of the Claremont and Earl Academy players in the stands. And then the game is over and I am being carried off the shiny hardwood court for banking in the winning shot.

Back in the small locker room, schoolmates he have never spoken a word with offer congratulations, as do faculty members. And here is Robin Abel, tall and thin and pretty, her dark eyes shining, saying to me, "I'm having a party tonight. I'd like so much for you to come. Would you, please?" She places her hand lightly on my sweaty arm, tilts her head toward her shoulder as she awaits my answer, and shows her dazzling smile.

"Sure," I mumble, receiving the slip of paper she hands me but unable to sustain eye contact. A girl like that. It doesn't make sense.

I slip away without showering, needing to leave before anything goes wrong, though it has already gone wrong, life opening to me for this one bright moment when it has been closed for so long, and now the moment is gone and I am alone on a Saturday night in early April, the cool wind quickly drying the sweat on my face and body. Cars and cabs tear along the avenue looking for someone to hurt and warm air rich with the smell of the underground rises through the subway grates. When I am a safe distance from the scene, and there is little likelihood of laugh hounds like Freddy Snyder following behind, I pull the piece of paper from my pocket and stare at the neat rightward-sloping script: Robin Abel, 840 Park Avenue, penthouse A, BU 9-8765. Imagine that. Even her phone number. Along the avenue old men sit on bar stools drinking and smoking and watching the fights. My life with Jane feels as dismal and small as theirs.

At Fifty-ninth Street and Columbus Circle, my feet turn east and take me along

Central Park South to Fifth Avenue and a line of tourist carriages with tired-looking nags at the entrance to the park, bored drivers hoping for tourists in love willing to spring for a lap around the park. (In one of those buildings in the long ago the cool muzzle of the gas mask, the dentist telling me to count backward from one hundred, falling, falling, from the Empire State Building, a cap being pried from a bottle top I am, then spitting blood into a metal spittoon, a woman scolding me on the bus home for not giving up my seat. Stung by her criticism but Momma defending me). And here is the Plaza Hotel, all lit up, and Grand Army Plaza, with its enormous fountain. One avenue after another comes and goes, with no brake applied, and now I am heading north on Park Avenue on the cold, sparkling night, seeking to match the number on Robin's scrap of paper with those on the awnings of the doorman buildings that tower over the boulevard. Like someone daring himself to maintain a brisk pace though fast approaching the edge of a cliff am I.

And now the edge of the cliff is here, the red awning with the number clearly visible in white. The avenue is quiet, the buildings holding their sense of order, while down below I feel and hear the rumble of a passenger train moving slowly through the tunnel. With each change to green of the traffic light I start across, resolved to penetrate the mystery of Claremont social life, only to return to the safety of the curb.

A cab has pulled up in front of the building. Robin herself steps out of a Checker cab with another girl I do not know and two young men in jackets and ties. Now other cabs have arrived, one of them carrying John Edel and another Diane Coleman, the appearance of these familiar Claremont faces producing a shiver of fear and dispelling the illusion that I could be on the same social footing with her or any of them. She had seen me in my moment of stardom, just that blip of time, which led her to believe I might

be worthwhile knowing. She had seen something I couldn't hope to sustain. I move back from the intersection to avoid detection and head back west to the other side of town for the subway and the below-ground experience that will take me home.

The park calls to Jane and me and so we go to it and lean against the iron rail that separates us from Dead Man's Hill. A spring shower has come and gone, leaving wetness everywhere and drawing out the strong smell of the soil. Almost three years have passed since we would eagerly climb over the rail for a morning of pleasure. Beyond the hill and the budding plane trees a Circle Line boat makes its way north on the Hudson toward the George Washington Bridge. It occurs to me that I have never been on it and that there is so much I have never seen.

She has grown heavier. Her hips bulge in the jeans that had fit her so well the year before, and now she has developed the habit of running her hands down her sides, as if to shave off the unwanted pounds. There are other things. Sometimes she neglects to wash her hair and lets dirt form under her nails. The weight of our involvement sits on me like a fat stone.

"Gideon, I was thinking. I got a letter from my cousin Jennie in Mexico City the other day. She says her family would like to have me down for a couple of weeks this summer. I talked about it with my father and he said it would be okay with him if I stayed with them. Her father's an executive with some big American company. They're pretty rich, and I used to have this feeling that they looked down on us, but maybe I'm wrong. It might be kind of nice to see Jennie."

With every word that she spoke, the weight on me lifts.

“When would you go? Are you sure it would only be for two weeks?” I hear myself say, seeking to mask my relief with an anxious expression of concern.

"Look, if it's going to upset you, I just won't go. Maybe it's the wrong thing to do."

“Just remember to come back,” I say.

“Of course I'll come back,” she says.

There are people who want her, people with status. No more dependence on Mary Marie and Cathy Cathleen, who shun her one day and accept her the next.

Horseback riding. Tennis. Swimming. Parties. Her cousin Jennie will be home from her first year at college this coming summer. She's beautiful and knows everyone, Jane says. It isn't long before Jane's trip is as worrisome to me as the prospect of our going on in the same way had been.

It happens on the long side street between Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway as I am heading home. Suddenly, in my mind's eye, I see Momma with detachment and clarity and no yearning. I see that I can leave her. It is nothing more than that. I stop and lean against a parked car, pondering this newfound freedom.

"Gideon, come on. You're not going to China. You'll be back tonight," Jane says, pulling away, after I tried to give her a long kiss.

"You're right," I say, embarrassed, standing in the depot reeking of gas fumes. The uniformed driver at the door of the bus snatches my ticket, as if punishing me for my unmanly excess. "I'll phone you when I get there," I turn and say, but she has already

gone.

Scary to be in a tunnel under the Hudson River, particularly when the traffic stalls. Suppose the wall cracks and the tunnel floods. Suppose. But now we are in the ruins of New Jersey—marshland and, in the distance, refineries with clouds of smoke streaming from the stacks. Across the aisle an old man with watery eyes laughs silently, his chest heaving. Has he too seen the inappropriate kiss? *I want to marry you someday.*

Philadelphia is the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall. No. It is the corner I turn, startled to see the old stadium rising casually above the cracked, weedy sidewalk and rundown residential buildings. The light towers, the perfect symmetry of the arches and columns, the turret, the sheer promise of a field of green beyond its magnetic perimeter, stun me to a complete stop, as if witnessing in its neglected grandeur some glimmer of the eternal, an ache surfacing for something on the nebulous fringes of memory, some time in the faraway past where everything was in harmony—a summer day packed with people and love and excitement and security.

The groundskeepers lay down white chalk lines and turn the infield a dark brown with streams of water from their hoses. Advertisements for Schmidt's beer, Gillette razors, and Alpo dog food colorfully plaster the outfield walls. The Dodgers wear their road uniforms of gray and powder blue, with those heartbreaking red numerals on the back of their tops. The hometown Phillies wear white pinstripes with burgundy trim.

Don Drysdale comes out of his windup with a sidearm delivery, causing a couple of batters to bail out of the box, and now he is off the mound jawing at one who does not like the close shave number 53 has given him. Jim Bunning, the the Phillies hurler, wears number 14, a low number usually reserved for an everyday player. Bunning,

stringy and equally mean, matches Drysdale, one goose egg after another going up on the outfield scoreboard.

The Phillies have more than sliver lips Jim Bunning. They have big Dick Stuart. They have little Tony Taylor. They had left-handed power hitter Wes Covington with his slouching stance and jolting Johnny Callison with the giant number 6 on his back. And they have Frank Thomas and dangerous Dick Allen with his pulverizing power.

The Dodgers still have fleet Willie Davis. They still have Brooklyn Tommy Davis. They have Ron Fairly and Wes Parker (as smooth as his name) and Maury Wills, with all the infield agitation he can cause when he dances off first base. And behind the plate they have Johnny Roseboro, who knows how to summon pitches to his carefully positioned mitt.

The pull of seeing the Dodgers in a strange city was strong, overwhelming. I got only a taste of them that summer day in 1957 at Ebbets Field and then they were gone, gone, to Los Angeles, and now here I am with a chance to see them again, in an old ballpark in a city not my own, and to love them more for not having loved them enough. But the fifth inning comes, and my pockets are empty and I am having hunger pangs as I watch those around me devour ballpark franks and the windbreaker I have zipped to the top proves no match for the dropping temperature. Into extra innings the game goes, with neither team having crossed home plate. I feel like I am on a fragile boat drifting far from land. The time has come to jump overboard and swim for safety.

Through the dark streets I flee. At an intersection a Negro man suddenly lunges, jabbing me in the ribs. "Thought I stabbed you, didn't you? Thought you was fucking dead." The man grins, feeling his power.

In the bus station I make a collect call to Momma.

"Are you with that man again? Is that it?" she demands, remembering Boston.

"I'm with me, Momma. With me. I'll be home. You'll see."

"Do not give me these sleepless nights, son. Do not do that."

On the virtually empty bus, I smoke a cigarette to tamp down the hunger. Across the aisle sits a powerfully built Negro man took a seat across the aisle. As the bus leaves the terminal, the man turned to me, and says, in a matter-of-fact voice, "Are you spitting at me, man? Is that what you're doing?"

"No," I say.

"Don't be lying to me now so I have to hurt you."

"No. I'm not lying."

"I'll be having my eye on you. Because I can't have you disrespecting me."

The man turns off his overhead light, becoming a pulsing presence with direct access to his anger in the darkness. Two warnings have come in quick succession. The world can dispatch me with alacrity.

"Oh, Jesus," I think, holding my sides and feeling the vibration of the man all through my being.

Miss Weston, the music teacher for the upper school, sits alone in the auditorium on the main floor as I emerge from the stairwell. She is a familiar face, though I have never spoken with her. She holds a negligible place in my mind and surely I do too in hers, as I have no ability to blend my voice with others in chorus or to carry a tune or truly understand an octave or musical notation.

Without introduction or explanation, she says, "I want you to read this passage," trailing her finger down the length of one page and half of the next of a slender paperback. I begin reading the rough English dialect in an even voice, without feeling or real comprehension or curiosity about the content or where this might be leading. My only desire is to get away, and Miss Weston obliges with a perfunctory thank-you, after which I disappear back into the stairwell.

And yet, the next day, Bert Bach sticks out his hand. "Congratulations," he says, and so I shake the small, soft hand of a boy I have been unable to speak to in the course of four years.

"For what?" I manage to say, over the vast differences that separate us. Bert has given up the fuzz ball hair cut, but his popularity with the girls would remain if he had no hair, as they are drawn to his mind.

"You've got the part of Bill Walker," he says, smiling up at me.

"That's nice," I say.

"You do want the part, don't you?" Bert asks, appearing puzzled.

For some reason, I had thought Bert expected me to be nonchalant. Wasn't that the way intelligent people were? "Oh sure. It's great," I say, hoping these words convey the enthusiasm Bert is evidently seeking. I am ready to give Bert whatever he wants, whatever he needs, paralyzed as I am by the fear that he is ready to unleash some mocking laughter. Yet Bert just stares at me, as if something remains unclear and he is plain uncomfortable about the interaction he is having. Assessing, or trying to assess. That is what chunky Bert Bach's intelligent face shows he is doing before he moves on.

I am unable to say "Part? What part?" so Bert would see I didn't know what he

was talking about. And so now I have to solve the mystery all on my own. But not for long, because a buzz is going on in the classroom about the senior play, something by George Bernard Shaw called *Major Barbara*. That buzz. The ferocity of it. The *extent* of it. Everyone seeming to have an understanding of what is going on and grabbing for every morsel of what is going on like ravenous sharks, devouring everything the school has to offer and in ongoing dialogue about what that thing is.

The doorman directs me to the eighth floor, where a maid answers the door and later serves soft drinks and fruit juice and small sandwiches during breaks in rehearsal.

"Where does it go?" I say, staring at the spiral staircase.

"What do you mean, 'Where does it go?' Haven't you ever seen a duplex apartment before?" Freddy Snyder still has no use for modulation when he can speak in the key of astonishment.

"Sure. I guess I just forgot. Or maybe I never saw one that looked just like that."

Freddy smells vulnerability. It is his right to do so. "Where were you today, Garatdj? How come you weren't at school?"

"I was home fixing my bike," I say, somehow thinking that will sound more interesting than saying I wasn't feeling all that well. But the effect is not quite what I had intended.

"You were home fixing your bike? I don't believe it. People, did you hear what Garatdj just said? He didn't come to school because he had to stay home and fix his bike."

"Way to go, Garatdj. What's it going to be tomorrow, a leaky toilet?" Bert Bach

laughs.

"No, he has to repair the dishwasher," Diane Coleman offers. She wears a man's shirt of luminous white outside the tight jeans that sheathe her long legs. He has never seen a girl do what she does with clothes, that they should be so magical on her body. No one will ever see her shaving weight from her body.

This much I understand about the character Bill Walker: he is a working-class brawler who specializes in what for. Bill comes to the Salvation Army looking for his girlfriend, who has done him wrong by running off. Enraged to learn that she has become a religious convert, he grabbed a Salvation Army woman by the hair and gives her a little of his what for and then has some for an older woman, while threatening others with the same. But when he comes face to face with Major Barbara, the Salvation Army leader, she bothers his conscience for striking the women, and he reacts angrily.

Major Barbara: It's not me that's getting at you, Bill.

Bill Walker: Oo else is it?

Major Barbara: Somebody that doesn't intend you to smash women's faces, I suppose. Somebody or something that wants to make a man of you.

Bill Walker: Mike a menn o me! Ain't Aw a menn? Eh? Oo sez Aw'm not a menn?

Major Barbara: There's a man in you somewhere, I suppose. But why did he let you hit poor little Jenny Hill? That wasn't very manly of him, was it?

These and other lines I speak, and Diane Coleman, her beautiful face lightly dusted with freckles close to mine, responds with words of redemption, her

orthodontically straightened teeth as white as her shirt. Transfixed, I listen.

Major Barbara: It's your soul that's hurting you, Bill, and not me. We've been through it all ourselves. Come with us, Bill. To brave manhood on earth and eternal glory in Heaven. Come.

As my hand approaches the faces of poor Jenny Hill, the girl, and the older woman, Rummy Mitchens, the vise of self-consciousness tightens and I pull back. Does Miss Weston know about my violence? Was she there to bear witness on the Columbia campus, or elsewhere, when he slapped Jane Thayer? Do they all know this about me? Is this why I have been chosen?

Miss Weston's coaxing words fly like pins from her gap-toothed mouth. "I know you have it in you. I know you can do it," she says, with a smile and a wink.

To Riverside Church we move for full dress rehearsals, the stage and footlights and heavy curtain and rows of seats offering tangible proof that something will come of all those evenings in the homes of Diane Coleman and Bert Bach and Freddy Snyder. The production is moving forward because of people with larger minds than my own and the will to make it happen.

"You'll finish my milk, won't you, Gideon? You're a growing boy," Diane says to me one afternoon, during a break in the church cafeteria, and slides the half-pint across the table. "The straw's been in my mouth, but you won't mind that, will you?" She winks as I sip from the straw. She is my age, and yet she is older.

I take away from the rehearsal some reawakened pain to belong—to her, to them,

to all those who live in the magical land of high numbers—and head back to the neighborhood. From the sun dial on the mall of the Columbia campus I watch as Jane, barefoot on the south lawn, chases after a Frisbee tossed by Rob Koley, lunging for the disc as it curves away from her and rolls to a stop in the grass. Feebly does she toss it back, the disc falling far short of where Rob and Scully and Kevin and Luis and Jimmy Riley are gathered. The thought occurs to me to leave, but my feet take me forward, and as I draw near, they stop their activity and stare.

"Here he is, Jane. Here's your man," Scully says, putting a blubber arm around her.

"Yeah," she says, "my man," the sardonic ring bringing a wall of laughter.

It is not right to deny Momma on a city street or kill her with neglect at any place or time. I see what I have done and how I am held in captive fear of the laughing things out there. I must come back from that place, if only a little. And so I do. But when Hannah and Vera accompany Momma to the theater, some challenge presents itself to my mind that they should be sitting in the audience as well. I cannot think of them liking or supporting me. The wall must not come down. It is dangerous to see beyond the darkness to the light when I am invested in injuries and slights that keep me apart.

And Jane. Jane has come too, to the very church where she has her Friday night social. There. There she is, sitting with Momma and my two sisters.

But my father has not come. He was not a consideration. And my brother Luke has not come. He was not a consideration. And my sisters Naomi and Rachel have not come, for they are dead in life.

Are they wearing nametags or holding up signs that say GARATDJIAN to bring them into association with me? And what is more, the evening is showering mercy upon me, the footlights blinding me to the beyond and keeping me safe from any affiliation with kin or friend that might work against my autonomy.

In oversize pants and a loose-fitting shirt, and fueled by hysteria, I shout out my lines and smack this one and that one, and for this receive a burst of applause. “You stole the show,” someone says. Recognizing my desperate need for attention and the meagerness of my life, they have been only too happy to give me something, like those who call attention to my basketball ability because nothing noteworthy can be attributed to my mind. Thoughts like these go with me into the night.

Ogden Connifer is hosting a party at his family’s apartment on Riverside Drive.

“You can’t come. It’s only for cast members. That’s what Ogden Connifer told us,” I say, leaning on my understanding of what Ogden Connifer said while not entirely sure that Ogden Connifer said anything of the kind.

“Ogden Connifer? What kind of name is that?” Like a jack o’ lantern Jane’s face shines, lighted with a jeer and all the hurt and fury informing it.

“I have no idea,” I say, in the post-performance noise of the milling crowd.

“God, you looked so skinny in those pants,” Jane says, letting those be her final words.

From the living room window in Ogden’s apartment I can see down past the trees of Riverside Park to the darkness of Dead Man’s Hill, and so I am where I have never been as a guest in the realm of excellence. Lance plays a medley of songs, drawing a small crowd to the Connifers' grand piano, among them a tall young man in a cashmere

sweater with his arm around Diane Coleman. Someone says he is a sophomore at Princeton. And there are others who aren't part of the cast, let alone the school, making Ogden's words a fiction. I stand in a corner for a few minutes, not knowing where to put my eyes, and leave when I can.

A gauntlet of familiars awaits me as I enter the lobby of my building.

"Hey, here he is. The star. Marlon Brando himself," Lenny says, saluting with a raised coffee container.

"Come over here and have a drink, Marlon," Jerry says.

"Yeah, join us." Luke reached down for the green bottle of port by the side of his chair and fills a paper cup. The wine tastes thick and sweet.

"Momma told me you were great. Hannah and Vera said the same thing. I got kind of messed up today. I was up real late last night. That's why I didn't come. You know what I mean?"

"It wasn't a big deal," I say.

"Give him some more wine. He looks thirsty," Lenny says, and so Luke pours from a second bottle.

"My brother the star. Can't you just see him going far? He's going off to college. Where'd you say you were going?"

"I don't know. Muhlenberg. Maybe Gettysburg. Maybe Colby." Even among them I have a sense of failure and shame.

"Never heard of them. How come you don't go someplace like Columbia or Harvard?" Lenny asks,

"Because they don't want him, that's why." Jerry laughs.

"Hey, man, leave him alone. He's doing great." Hearing Luke come to my defense just depresses me more.

Lenny lets loose with a riff. "Yeah. All this college stuff. Like Harvard is better than some place else. It's all bullshit. Like where did Lyndon Johnson go to college? Some place you never heard of and look at him. He's sitting in the White House. Where did Abraham Lincoln go to college? Or George Washington? I'll bet they didn't even go to college at all, and look what they did. So all this Harvard shit. 'Look at me, man. I go to Harvard.' Like you're supposed to kiss their asses, or something. It's all bullshit, man."

"Pour Gideon another cup of wine. He still looks thirsty," Jerry says.

Luke fills my cup again. "Hey, this is the last one. You're drinking all our wine. What are you anyway, an alcoholic?" He laughs.

"Don't be calling him no names. He's a star. That's what he is, a star," Jerry says.

A pretty young woman wearing a short skirt and black tights has entered the lobby, making head turners of all of us. Probably a Barnard student or a graduate student at Columbia. More than a few live in the building. Our turn to the floor indicator above the elevator to see where she gets off.

"She's mine, all mine, if she comes back down," Jerry says.

"In your dreams," Luke says, as I climb the stairs to my room.

My personal college fund continues to grow. Every Sunday morning I perform the same ritual, tracking Auntie Eve down to the subway station before zipping back to the

building and pocketing a few twenties from her money closet. And this Sunday is no different. From inside her apartment, I listen, with acute anxiety, for footsteps out in the lobby. Hearing none, I open the door only to find a white-haired man with a big mustache directly in front of me.

"You gone and moved to a new apartment?" The man speaks with a Southern accent and in a whispery voice, his eyes and face filled with a laughter you can see but not hear, even from up close. He wears yellow pants and a bright blue shirt, as if he is on his way out the door to clobber golf balls on some fairway with his mashie.

"No," I say, trying to recover from my fright and inwardly recoiling at what sounds like an insinuation. I know the man's name and where he lives: Henry Crawford, in room 11C4. And though I have never spoken two words to him, I imagine him as a riverboat gambler with a hidden past, someone who maybe carries a derringer and shoots people dead with it.

"Hey. What's your hurry?" he says, when I move past him, as if he hasn't finished with amusing himself.

"I'm not in a hurry," I say, though I am in full flight mode.

"You ran off like you were in a race." Mr. Crawford's whole being is alight with some more of that soundless laughter.

"Did you want to tell me something?" I ask, when Mr. Crawford's amusement goes on unabated.

Mr. Crawford pulls himself together sufficiently to say, "Why, you took off without giving me a chance to tell you about a job. Doesn't seem to me that you're very interested, from the way you're behaving."

"I'm interested," I say. Some state of hysteria has taken me over, as often happens when adult men address me, an eagerness to please that ensures I will say yes when I really mean no.

And now here is Momma, her key ring jangling, her arrival seeming to be cause for Mr. Crawford's amusement to grow and grow.

"Good morning," she says.

"Good morning, ma'am," Mr. Crawford replies, as she let herself into Auntie Eve's apartment.

"That apartment seems to be a busy place," Mr. Crawford says, after she has closed the door behind her.

"I guess," I say, thinking I have never liked the man just to look at him and now I like him even less.

"Well, aren't you even going to ask me what the job is?"

"Oh, sorry," he said.

"Go to the bookstore up the block and speak with the owner tomorrow. His name is Hank Rowicki. You can't miss him." The mention of Mr. Rowicki seems to get Mr. Crawford's silent laughter going again.

Mr. Rowicki stands behind the counter on a foot-high platform poring over a form, now and then checking something off on it with a pen, his glasses atop his head in a cushion of long brown hair. In his other hand, between nicotine-stained fingers, he holds a cigarette that is more ash than tobacco.

"Are you Mr. Rowicki?" The question is unnecessary, not only because of the big

sign outside that says, "Rowicki's House of Paperback Books," but because I remember what happened when the store was having grand opening five years before, how I came to the counter with Jim Brosnan's baseball diary, *The Long Season*, and was ten cents short and asked if I could take the book and pay him the rest later, and how Mr. Rowicki snatched the book from me and said, "Come back when you have the dough."

"What do you want?" Mr. Rowicki asks, without looking up.

"Mr. Crawford sent me."

"So."

"So he said maybe you have a job for me."

"Are you literate?"

Stung into silence by the rudeness of the question, I simply stare at Mr. Rowicki as he follows with more. "What's the matter? You don't know what the word means?"

"I can read and write."

"What's your name?"

"Gideon."

"You got a last name, Gideon?"

"Garatdjian."

"Armenian? Your father hang rugs all over the walls?"

"No," I say.

"Are you a thief? If I let you work here, will you try to steal my books?"

"No."

"Be here tomorrow at five o'clock. And be here on time or don't bother showing up."

As I pass by the West End Bar several doors down, the smell of meats and beer blowing out onto Broadway through the warm air of the vent, I am seized by a fear that between now and the next afternoon, something will prompt Mr. Rowicki to change his mind and I will lose this thing that has been given to me.

But Mr. Rowicki hasn't changed his mind. The next afternoon he greets me with a feather duster and says, "Run this over the books on the racks and familiarize yourself with the titles so you can be of some use to the customers." Wire racks of paperback books line the four aisles and floor-to-ceiling shelves hold others, from the Signet classics, with fetching illustrated covers, to Harper Torch and Doubleday Anchor books aimed at the college crowd. The one concession to hardcover publishing is the Modern Library series, which gets a shelf of its own. And at the front of the store are periodicals, quarterlies, intellectual tabloids: *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, *The Nation*, *The Observer*, *The Guardian*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The Economist*, *Partisan Review*, *Paris Review*.

I return to the counter area sneezing from all the dust I have feathered into the air. "Go get me a container of coffee from Chock Full O' Nuts. Black, no sugar. Don't fool around going or coming," Mr. Rowicki says, handing me a five-dollar bill. Coffee drinking and cigarette smoking. Those seem to be his two passions, judging from the overflowing ashtrays and the empty black and yellow and white Chock Full O' Nuts containers on the shelves behind the cash register. Unless he has a tapeworm, he can't be much for food, not the way his clothes hang from his frame.

That evening a woman hands me a twenty to pay for two mystery novels, but in one fluid motion Mr. Rowicki's skeletal hand swoops down to snatch the bill out of my fingers. Pressing heavily on the keys of the antique cash register, he rings up the sale,

making it clear that he alone will handle the money and work the register. If I and the woman want to know who is in charge, he has just shown us.

The woman has a big bust and a small waist. "That one will wear you out. She can go on for hours," Mr. Rowicki says of the customer, after she has left.

"What? How can you know such a thing?" I ask.

"I've been around the block a few times," Mr. Rowicki replies with complete matter-of-factness.

Somehow it isn't for me to ask if Mr. Rowicki been around the block with this particular woman. But his sexual commentary has set me on fire. Mr. Rowicki is saying that women are not necessarily who they appear to be—that they wear masks that hide their raging sensuality. And there are more dumbfounding assessments to follow. Is it possible that the serious-looking woman who purchased several Jane Austen novels has multiple partners or that the scholarly woman with the severe expression has many lovers in addition to her husband?

At the back of the store a shelf serves as a secret passageway, opening with a push onto a narrow room with supply cabinets and a toilet. Several open boxes, containing copies of Henry Miller's Rosy crucifixion trilogy, lie on the floor. I have been restocking the volumes all afternoon. Only the opening of the first one, *Sexus*, in which Tania's genitalia are described in a graphic way, am I familiar with. I am not the compulsive shoplifter I once was. You must not think so. In fact, I have not stolen from a store in some years and have no reason to do so now. And yet my terror is no defense against shoving the fat first volume into the front of my loose-fitting jeans and starting a slow, endless walk to the front of the store, where Mr. Rowicki stands on that foot-high

platform behind the register. His sharp beak gives him the appearance of a hawk about to swoop down on his pathetic prey.

"Goodnight," I say.

"What's your hurry?" Mr. Rowicki asks.

"It's nine o'clock. I thought I was supposed to work four hours."

"Are you one of those clock watchers?"

"No."

"You're not leaving heavier than when you came in, are you?" Mr. Rowicki's stare is formidable in its penetrating power.

"No," I say.

"Make sure you keep it that way. I have ways of dealing with workers who don't," he says, before turning to a customer.

And then it is over.

"You will go, will you not?" Momma asks, giving me the announcement of the graduation ceremony she has received in the mail. I glance at the card, with its fancy italic script, and hand it back to her.

"No." I say, hearing her fearful, entreating tone.

"But Gideon, how can you not go to your own graduation? Can you not be reasonable?"

It would not be like the play. I would have to stand with her. People who, after that day, will be out of my life forever, will see me with her and say, "Oh my god, look at Garatdjian. Is that his grandmother? Why didn't his mother come? Does he have a

mother, do you think? What? That *is* his mother? Come on, you're kidding me. That woman wearing the men's shoes and the rubber stockings is his *mother*? Damn, if that's his mother, let's get a look at his father. What do you suppose *he* looks like?"

Only there would be no looks at my one-legged father, for the simple reason that he will not be there. Momma isn't about to let him in on the fact that I have been attending a private school after keeping it a secret from him all these years.

But it isn't Momma and it isn't my father. Isn't it enough that I have died? Do I have to go as the corpse that I am? Do I have to go and see that everyone else has won and I have lost and die once more?

With Momma do I arrive at the Barbizon-Plaza Hotel, near Central Park, on West Fifty-Eighth Street, where we leave behind the sunlight for the shadows. On the dais stands Mr. Horst-Lehman, a flower in his lapel, his meatiness wrapped in a silk suit. Something about the future. Something about marching forward with hope and conviction. Behind him sits Mr. Arbuckle, of Princeton and mathematical genius fame. And now classmates are being called up, in alphabetical order, to receive their diplomas: Robin Abel, Wellesley bound; Bert Bach, headed for Harvard; Diane Coleman, accepted by Saraah Lawrence; Ogden Connifer, who gained early admission to Swarthmore.; John Edel, with his ticket to Yale.

I receive my rolled parchment, and after the playing of "Pomp and Circumstance," hand it to my mother and begin to head toward a side door..

"But Gideon, where are you going?" Momma looks stunned, but people are too dangerously close. Momma not understanding that the world cannot forever be running

on Momma time and that I must get away, I must, if I am to live. I must shed this place, these people, this life.

As I approach the exit a strong hand grips my shoulder. Turning, I stare into the big, open face of Mr. Sadowski. Where did he come from that he now stands in front of me in his worn gray suit and dull red tie, and imposing, even in a public setting, such unbearable intimacy? And are those tears in his big eyes?

"I just wanted to say that I would be proud to have you for a son."

The words flood my senses. Nothing is alive in me now but craziness. Hearing my speechlessness, Mr. Sadowski tears away, as do I, in a different direction, sunlight waiting for me as I streak past the Grand Army Plaza and the Plaza Hotel, catching the rich smell of manure deposited by the tired-looking carriage nags at the south border of Central Park. Past the zoo and the portrait artists I continued to speed, seeking to shed the stunned, abandoned look on Momma's face and the image of teary-eyed Mr. Sadowski and the sound of those devastating words. As my flight continues to the mall and the bandshell, I draw on a nonsense chant —ching chang kachung chong—in an effort to expunge Mr. Sadowski's sincere maleness.

At the terrace I slowly descend the steps to the lower level and sit on the rim of the Bethesda Fountain. The several rowboats out on the lake present a peaceful picture at odds with the turmoil within. What it is, I can't even say, only that there is an ache. Something has been lost. Something has died without my ever having even experienced it. I will never see these people again. The separation has been too abrupt, too violent. I am free, I try to tell myself, while wondering where in the world there is for me to go and wishing for some way to return and start all over again so I can make it right, because

how can you build on something that is so wrong?

Work until you drop. Such is the Spartan example set by Mr. Rowicki, for whom a twelve-hour shift is routine. Mr. Rowicki's life is as drab as the soiled clothes on his skeletal frame, and yet he makes it seem almost appealing. If, by the end of the day, my legs hurt from standing for eight or ten hours and I have grown tired of unpacking boxes, restocking empty shelves, taking inventory, wandering the aisles with a feather duster, going on coffee runs, or just standing around, by the next morning I am strangely eager for more.

The Communist Party, Quaker relief efforts following World War II, civil rights work—Mr. Rowicki has attached himself to causes and movements throughout his life, I come to learn as the weeks pass. Now, in middle age, he is seeking the stability and security he once had no need for. If he has spent his life looking out for others, the store is his way of looking out for himself. But it is more than work; it is his life. Interactions with customers and sales reps assuage his loneliness. He is not the man he would like to be, and his wound makes his harshness tolerable, a twisted form of affection. And my affection for him grows week by week, to the point where the sight of the stolen copy of *Sexus* in my room becomes unbearable and I must return it.

"This country never learns. Washington thinks it can stop a peoples' revolution with technology," Mr. Rowicki says, one afternoon, while chatting with a bearded young man who has just come from an anti-Vietnam War conference.

"You should go to Russia if you don't like this country," I interject.

"I should do what?" the man says, responding with an incredulous smile.

“All the Russians want to do is make a Communist of you. And if they can’t do that, they will kill you. You should go to Russia. You’ll find out.” They don’t need to know that is what Momma says—“Let them go to Russia”—about people who criticize the United States.

“He’s young. He has some bad information,” Mr. Rowicki says, by way of apology.

“No, I don’t. The Communists are coming. First to South Vietnam. Then Australia. Then Hawaii. And from there they will jump to the mainland. They have only one ambition, to put you and me and all of us in reeducation camps.”

“Maybe some of us need a reeducation camp,” the young man says.

“I’ve hired a reactionary idiot,” Mr. Rowicki adds.

Jane has met someone, an engineering student at Columbia. She was just sitting on the campus, and he came up and introduced himself, she says. “He’s throwing a pool party this weekend at his parents’ place up in Scarsdale, and he’s invited me. His name is Bert. Pretty neat, huh?”

”I guess,” I say. How long will the party last? Will there be dancing? How many people had been invited? How will she get there? How will she get home? Questions like this I am able to ask. As to what the party means, that is a question I cannot go near. Nor can I tell her not to go. Columbia is Columbia, after all, and if Columbia wants her, that can only mean the world wants her, too. The invitation floods me not only with fear but something that feels like painful pleasure.

I imagine them zipping up to Westchester in the Corvette she says he drives, the

top down and his chubby arm around her and the wind blowing her hair, as I pace the floor of Rowicki's House of Paperback Books. Will this Bert treat her like the frat boys do the Irish-Catholic girls they round up at the bars along Broadway for their weekend parties? What is this pain I have consented to?

I continue pacing in my room that evening, filling the ashtray with butts. Jane described the guy as pudgy, but what does pudgy mean when he has Scarsdale wealth and a Corvette and those Columbia numbers that are the only indicators of success a person needs?

By nine o'clock he was calling her every twenty minutes. On the sixth try, I reach her, not her mother. The party was fine, she says. Everyone lounged around the pool for several hours before dinner was served to the ten or so guests who showed up. Bert did no more than hold her hand briefly, drove her home, and thanked her for coming.

I take a worried mind into sleep with me that night. Had Bert found her drab? Had he found her uninteresting? Was he disappointed in her figure in a bathing suit? Had her dinner table manners been less than he had expected?

The songs of summer follow me. I hear the sullen Stones, how big-lipped Mick Jagger dares to say the word "satisfaction" while riding high on the power sound of Keith Richard's electric guitar. I hear sweet Smokey Robinson and the Miracles sing "Tracks of My Tears." I hear Billie Joe Royal sing "Down in the Boondocks" with feeling and wicked Wilson Pickett sing "In the Midnight Hour," which makes me dance in my head. I am brought to tearful attention hearing Sonny and Cher sing "I Got You, Babe" And come to a full stop hearing pissed-off Bob Dylan snarl "Like a Rolling Stone" like the

anger angel that he is. And oh yes, I hear the Beach Boys sing "California Girls," but they cannot fully pull me to them no matter how many times I hear their clean-cut sound.

On a Sunday in July Jane and I head out on the BMT for Coney Island, where under the boardwalk necking couples lie shielded from the hellish sun. Jane offers no help, purposely trailing slowly behind me over the feet-scorching sands close to the water's edge, where we spread a Turkish towel. And now that humming. What the hell is that? Some kind of fakery, the kind of thing people who can't sing do pretending they actually could sing if they only felt like it. And sitting there on the towel conspicuously overweight, a fold of fat around her midsection.

A girl in a turquoise string bikini and the body for it—the kind who appears in the centerfold of the *Daily News* at least a few times every summer—passes close by, turning the heads of the young and old to her as she slowly walks, dripping from her ocean dip, back to her towel. No heads will turn for Jane, in her two-piece suit that exposes a fold of fat around her midsection. And if they do turn for me—all skin and bones, with big bulky contraptions for knees and a bix box for a head balanced on a stra-thin neck—it will not be to marvel at a thing of beauty.

Nothings, nobodies, nada, the two of us.

"Where's your locket?" I ask. I had given her a gold locket for her birthday the previous month, and only minutes before it had been around her neck.

"I don't know," she says, as if I am imposing on her with the question.

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I don't know. That's what I mean."

"Well, we have to find it. Doesn't the damn locket mean anything to you?"

“Find it yourself, creep,” Jane says, her mouth a churning, inflammatory goad that sends my right hand hard against her cheek.

The tears pool in her eyes. “You weak, useless bastard,” she says, grabbing her things and heading off across the sands toward the boardwalk.

I stare at the sands at the edge of the towel, braced for the blow that will inevitably come. But again no punishment arrives for my cowardice. When I can, I lift my eyes to the massive parachute jump jutting into the sky and the billowing sails as the riders descend to earth. Slowly, warily, I take in the scene around me, expectant eyes filled with disgust, but see only bathers involved in their own pursuits, batting around a beach ball, listening to the radio, or snoozing under the protective cover of giant umbrellas.

In a widening arc around the towel, I begin my search, using my hands as a scoop and then a sieve, the sands pouring through my fingers. A cigarette butt, a shell, but no locket. Maybe one of the beachcombing kids will find the locket that night when they drag the beach, but it is off Jane's neck forever.

But she does not freeze me out, the way she would have in the past. I do not have to call her a hundred times or die for several weeks. We visit Rockefeller Center, where she picks up her airline ticket at a travel agency near the International Building, on Fifth Avenue, and the huge bronze statue of Atlas, shouldering the earth. Across Fifth Avenue worshipers and tourists flow in and out of St. Patrick's Cathedral, its thin spires rising into the calm, blue sky.

The gently sloping promenade leads to the ice skating rink, ringed by a festival of flags, where in the summer heat waiters in short black jackets maneuver between tables

balancing trays with food and drinks. In the fall, the waiters and diners will be gone and skaters will gracefully circle the ice.

As if turning to some long-ago chapter of my life, I remember the dentist's office high above the street and the fantasy of the dark-eyed man bathing me in a hotel bathroom. How have I gotten from a small boy to the tall, skeletal person I am now? It has happened too fast. I'm not prepared.

"Will you write?" I ask.

The Aeronaves de Mexico ticket in her bag promises access to swimming pools and tree-lined streets and pleasure-filled days and evening drinks on a verandah; it represent flight from the hot city and its steamy subways cars and huge crowds. People—grownups—have arranged for her to be elsewhere. All she had to do was pick up the ticket. It just seems magical that such connections are possible. By comparison my own family seems like an an island to itself, with no relations in range, if I am not to count Auntie Eve.

"I'm only going away for two weeks. You're the one who will really be going away."

"I guess," I say.

"What do you mean, you guess? Of course you are. That's what I like about you. You won't allow yourself to be tied to your mother's apron strings, like my father."

The sound of her voice, as if she is here but not here, and speaking as she does of Momma and her apron strings.

"My girlfriend is going away, and I need to be with her when she does," I say to Mr.

Rowicki, after my coffee run for him to Chock Full O’Nuts. Today is a *coffee and* day for Mr. Rowicki. He has opted for a nutted cheese sandwich, and it is an excellent choice, though nothing stands up to their Friday sandwich special, tuna fish, which along with a bowl of steaming clam chowder soup, will send you right to heaven. Things have progressed to where now Mr. Rowicki tells me to get something for myself on these Chock Full runs. If gruff love is not in the air, then it is something close, and not easily tolerable, the stick being the truer and more honest expression of feeling.

“Could you try speaking English, or do I need to send for an interpreter?”

“Huh?”

“Your girlfriend is going away, and you need to be with her when she does?”

“She is leaving on a jet plane tomorrow. I need to say goodbye to her, if I could.”

"How long is this girlfriend of yours going to be away?"

"Two weeks."

"You're looking like a nervous wreck over her being away for two weeks?" Mr. Rowicki shakes his head and laughs at the preposterousness of young love.

Mr. Thayer drives a red Simca and whistles madly while zipping over the Triborough Bridge. The noise comes to me in the back seat of the tinny car as aggressive and excluding and informed by anger.

"Knock, knock," Mr. Thayer says.

"Who's there?" Jane asks.

"Sam."

"Sam who?"

Mr. Thayer begins to sing "Some Enchanted Evening" while maneuvering aggressively between larger cars and highballing trailer trucks.

"Oh Dad, that's funny."

I don't know if I like the idea of Jane being demonstratively pleased with her father's silly joke. It suggests some sort of alliance and gives more meaning to the fact that she had chosen to sit up front with him.

"I'll bet Gideon thought it was a real yuck-yuck, too. Didn't you, Gideon?" Mr. Thayer seeks me out through the rear-view mirror.

"That was pretty good."

"Maybe Gideon would like to share a joke with us of his own?"

"I'm not good at telling jokes." A true statement. My timing is off. I lack confidence.

But Mr. Thayer's mind has gone elsewhere. "Listen, big boy, you don't want to mess with this little baby. It's got firepower," he says, addressing himself to the muscular driver sitting in the cab of an oil truck in the right lane.

"Oh Dad," Jane says, laughing once again.

At the airport Mr. Thayer kisses Jane and smothers her in a hug.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do, Sweetie," he says, giving her a pat on the head.

"Oh, Daddy," she says, as Mr. Thayer retreats to a concession stand, giving us space.

"This is going to be hard." My words sound flat, ridiculous, pathetic. I really don't know what to say. Her happy, upbeat mood has separated her from me. I feel only dread hearing the flight announcement and seeing that, close by, a line has formed and an

airline official is checking boarding passes and passports.

"Jesus, Gideon. It's only two weeks. What's the big deal?" she snaps, echoing Mr. Rowicki's reaction, and leaves me with only a light kiss.

I sit up front with Mr. Thayer on the ride back to the city, still reeling from Jane's tone of contempt and display of strength. Once again has my excess plunged me into a lake of shame. From overhead comes the roar of a low-flying jet, the throb of its engines passing right through me. Surely it is Jane's jet, streaking angrily and dismissively through the skies.

A cheery, satisfied smile plays on Mr. Thayer's gray face. An unnerving sort of smile. "Feeling okay, Gideon?" he asks, taking a break from his annoying whistling. We have come to a stoplight one One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street in Harlem, where some store remain gutted from last year's riot. With ostentatious slowness and a baleful stare, a stout Negro man passes by as if to say that no vehicle has the power he possesses and that the two white occupants are dead if they so much as think of messing with him.

"I'm feeling fine," I say. A Penn Central passenger train shoots across the el, a blur of glistening steel as it bypasses the station.

"Well, your telephone bill should be lighter. That is, unless you get it in your head to call Mexico City every day." Mr. Thayer chuckles.

"No. I won't do that," I say.

Some blocks later, near his building, Mr. Thayer pulls into a parking spot. "End of the line, old sport. End of the line. You don't mind walking the rest of the way, I'm sure. It's not far to the scene of the crime, is it now?"

I try not to think of Mr. Thayer's insinuating words when there are other things,

like malfunctioning planes falling out of the skies, to consider, as I lie, moaning, on my sofa. Hour after hour I listen to WINS, “all news all the time,” which has recently come on the air. Now and then I sit up to smoke a cigarette. I don’t know what else to do.

"He's lovesick. I told him to go and find a few girls and he'll be all right, but he won't listen," Mr. Rowicki says to Mr. Crawford, the man who recommended me for the job and who works some days but not others. "He thinks he has to be faithful. What he doesn't realize is that she's probably having a ball with all those jalapeno peppers down Mexico way." Mr. Rowicki's slant on things prompts a look of merriment on Mr. Crawford's ruddy face and more of that noiseless laughter he specializes in.

Mr. Crawford and Mr. Rowicki make a strange pair, Mr. Crawford spiffy in his creased blue slacks and lemon yellow sports shirt with the alligator over the left breast. Not a hair out of place in that mane of white hair. If Mr. Crawford appears scrubbed clean, Mr. Rowicki is a picture of unkemptness, from his shaggy hair to his dirty fingernails. Unless an identical pair hangs in his closet, Mr. Rowicki wears the same gray slacks as on the day I began and the underarm area of his faded blue shirt is ringed with sweat stains. The casual way that Mr. Crawford moves about the store ensures he will never break a sweat, while Mr. Rowicki, intense and engaged, gives off a scent of perspiration.

Like a steamroller over my life is Mr. Rowicki, thinking he can squash my pain with his big words and big laugh.

“Get out there and wash all the windows. And be sure they’re squeaky clean,” Mr. Rowicki says. “You’ll find the supplies you need back there,” Mr. Rowicki says in the

afternoon, pointing a nicotine-stained finger in the direction of the storage room.

With the sun in the west, I roll back the awning, climb the ladder, and get to work. Soaping and rinsing the plate-glass windows and running the excess water off with a squeegee.

Having a ball. Jalapeno peppers.

"Your window washing stinks. Get out there and do it again," he says, the next morning. With the sun shining through, streaks are visible on the glass. But in a friendlier, softer voice, he says at the end of the day, "Work. Just work. It takes care of everything."

Momma, walking past, sees me and waves, and so I wave back to her.

"Is that your mother?"

Because Mr. Rowicki is Mr. Rowicki and not mocking Tom Smits and because denying has been going on too long, I nod, causing Mr. Rowicki to streak out the door in pursuit and lead her back into the store with her arm in his like a gallant, if disheveled, gentleman.

"I've heard all about you, Mrs. Garatdjian, and how hard you work. My assistant, Mr. Crawford, has a room in your building."

"Is that right?" Mrs. Garatdjian said. "My, what a nice store. So many books. You must be very learned."

"Reading is an activity I don't have as much time for as I would like. There are bills to pay. But I try."

"And do you have the Good Book, Mr. Rowicki?"

“The Bible?”

“Yes. In the beginning was the word, and the word was God, and all thought is meaningless without him.”

“We have scholarly studies on the Bible.”

“Yes, yes, there are the men with the fine minds who strut and preen, but they must be brought low into an understanding of their sinfulness in order to truly see. The world is full of searchers, but a search can only end when the truth has been found. And that truth is in the King James version of the Bible. Well, I must be going. It has been so nice to meet you, Mr. Rowicki.”

Momma talking the way she does, leaving mortification in her wake.

“Your mother has character. It's easy to see she's a worker. Let's see if you can have some of the same drive," Mr. Rowicki says, but nothing more.

Worker. As I busy myself unpacking boxes, a customer fumbles for the correct title of a book. “Something about a mockingbird,” she says. Mr. Rowicki zips off and quickly returns, triumphantly slapping the paperback on the counter. And in that moment a deeper understanding comes to me of Mr. Rowicki. He is more interested in knowing the titles of his books and their location in the store than in the content between their covers.

"Were you looking for something in particular?" Several times I have gone away and come back to the renting office only to find Mrs. Greene still sorting through the contents of the gray canvas sack the mailman has delivered. I have become like those anxious foreigners who queue up at the renting office window for their post.

"No, not really."

"You'll be going off to college soon. You must be looking forward to that."

"Oh, yes," I say, my eyes unable to stay with hers.

"And where is it you're going? Is it Princeton?"

"Colby."

"Colby? Where might that be?" The name has brought a frown to her face.

"Somewhere in Maine."

"Never heard of it, I'm afraid. Strange. I must have confused you with someone else who's going off to Princeton, or maybe it's Harvard. One of those good schools."

"Did you know my brother is a star?" Vera has dropped into the bookstore with Pam Becker. Is it possible she is intent on her special kind of mischief?

"What kind of star would that be?" Mr. Rowicki asks.

"He was one of the best high school basketball players in the city. He even won a trophy."

"This guy?" Mr. Rowicki looks doubtful.

Have I given Mrs. Greene the impression I am going to Princeton? Have I told Vera I was a great basketball star? How have these things come to be? I just want a place to hide, and yet here I am for all Broadway to see, as I stand about in Mr. Rowicki's House of Paperback Books.

As for Pam Becker, it occurs to me, as she yawns and stretches, that I hold as much interest for her as a neutered goat.

The morning comes when Mrs. Greene hands me a red-bordered air mail envelope. To my disappointment, a postcard accounts for the letter's heft. The Reforma, says the legend on the back of the card, giving a name to the boulevard on the front were Jane's cousin lives. The letter itself is written on lined loose-leaf paper. I drag heavily on my Marlboro before reading the contents, as if my life depends on it.

The Roberstons have this really neat apartment with a terrace, and they've given me my own room. It's nothing like our drab little place back on dear old One Hundred Twenty-Second Street. Jennie has this super boyfriend. He's a medical student at the University of Texas. She's in her second year of college but dates guys older than she is. He's got this neat white Corvette he tears around town in. Did I tell you she's a model? She's gotten even more beautiful and guys are calling her all the time and she's invited to one party after another. She took me for a tennis lesson the other day. The instructor was a young guy with a mustache and a nice tan. I'm going to need a lot of work, but Ben, that's his name, said I did okay. And then that night we went to a party out in the Lomas thrown by Ben and some of his friends. Boy, that tequila is some powerful stuff, and they sure get wild down here. Some of them just jumped in the pool with all their clothes on. Everyone was real nice except for this jerk who kept insisting that I dance with him when I didn't want to.

Several times I read the letter, the large, rightward sloping script pulling me along. She has hit the ground running. Nowhere does she say she misses me. I stare at the last line, "I

love you," and the X's and O's around her name, but my mind is fixed on the tennis instructor with the mustache and the pushy guy at the party. Even if the guy had been a crude, he was a persistent crude, and maybe he would wear her down. A widening circle of social involvement awaits Jane, with Jennie would be leading the way. How can I possibly accommodate myself to this new reality when my full being screams to control the situation from afar with the limited resources I possess.

You write to me of tennis and of golden tans and parties, but I am alone in my room. I do feel stabbed, and not by a Mexican, as in my dreams, when you mention these guys and events, and so I wish that you would stop. After your father dropped me off, I went home and turned on the radio to 1010 Wins, the all-news, all the time station, fearing that I would hear that a Mexico-bound plane had dropped out of the sky. Like a powerful narcotic the station was. I listened for two hours, sensing that unless I did, the accident would happen. You are all I can think about—you and this pain that will not stop. I wonder how to manage this space between where you are and where I am. Mr. Rowicki is my only companion. He taunts me all the livelong day. He does not know any other way. It is the custom he was brought up with. Truthfully, I don't mind the beatings he inflicts, as I hear him crying behind his words. You cannot hear that in everyone, but you can hear it in him. Mr. Rowicki has a heart that beats wildly for a love it cannot find. That store is his coffin as well as his life.

"Why would you go to a school in the sticks that nobody has ever heard of and that

probably costs a fortune? Did you apply to City College?"

Mr. Rowicki hasn't barged through this door wholly uninvited. I had been fretting about the payment coming due to Colby College, money I'm not close to raising through my Auntie Eve college fund.

"No, I haven't."

"Why the hell not? It's probably ten times better than this other school and it's practically free."

I shrug and wander the aisles, replenishing the racks where stock is low. You get on a track and you stay on it. The thought of changing direction creates anxiety. August has come; time is running out. That night I can hardly sleep. Suddenly the City College of New York is a viable option. I won't have to relocate or go into heavy debt. I can go to a free college and maybe get a place of my own, and Jane will come back from Mexico and everything will be all right in my world. Why hadn't I listened to Mrs. Jacoby, my history teacher?

The world is not in its proper order this morning, that Mr. Crawford, on a sunshine day, should be sitting on Mr. Rowicki's stool when I show up for work.

"Is Mr. Rowicki here?" I ask.

Mr. Crawford sniffs the air. "I don't think so."

"Will he be coming in?"

"At four o'clock. And believe me, we'll know when he's approaching."

I feel the need to hide my revulsion at Mr. Crawford's mockery, as sharing the same space with him is uncomfortable enough without his displeasure or anger. How

strange that the more he tries to tear Mr. Rowicki down, the more my liking and respect for Mr. Rowicki grow? Such humble work must be hard for a distinguished-looking Southern gentleman like Mr. Crawford. Easier to picture him as the owner of a horse farm sipping bourbon on the verandah and looking out at his vast estate than as a low-paid bookstore clerk living in an SRO with a public bathroom down the hall.

A woman comes to the counter cradling a stack of books, including *Seven Storey Mountain* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. Her arrival seems to have a galvanizing effect on Mr. Crawford. Not usually a speed merchant, he hustles off the foot-high platform and helps her place the books on the counter, then fishes a five-dollar bill from his pocket. “Go get me a container of coffee. And get something for yourself, too,” he says, turning to me.

If it takes a thief to catch a thief, then so be it. But I don’t catch him. I just spot him. I go along with Mr. Crawford’s clumsy ruse to get me out of the way so he can rob Mr. Rowicki blind, even knowing the woman’s haul of books will come to a painful sum. When I return five minutes later, the woman is gone and Mr. Crawford is fuss-budgeting, sorting books into their proper racks not from any mania for organization but to work off his anxiety. A no-sale sign shows in the window of the cash register.

Keeping Jane away from the aggressive guy at the party who wanted her to dance and away from the tennis player with the mustache has been hard work, but a corner has been turned. Jane has stopped moving outward and meeting more people and slowly recognizing what she has in me. I am sure this is so when her second letter arrives. With the excitement of a dog taking away a big thick bone to gnaw on, I carry the letter Mrs.

Greene hands me up to my room. Imagine. Jane's trip is almost half over. If anything, the days are going by too fast now.

Dear Gideon,

Boy, it really does sound hard for you up there in good old New York City working those long hours for Mr. Rowicki and then going home to your room at night. You should try to get out a little and have some fun. Gary—remember him, the tennis instructor—has a real wicked backhand. Jennie and I went to see him in a professional match and he was terrific. His friends threw a couple of more parties. These people go to parties every night. I don't know how he gets out on the tennis court the next day. They all drink a ton and do a lot of carrying on.

I stop reading. The fence I tried to build around her with mental exertion has been a big bag of crap. And she has obviously not read that part of my letter about the pain news of her social life causes me.

Take a deep breath, Gideon. The Robertsons have said I can stay down here with them. Daddy will be paying my tuition to a school here in Mexico City. Isn't that great?

The letter falls from my fingers to the floor. I lie on the sofa. A powerful kick to the stomach. So it feels. A blow too big to comprehend.

There is Momma, in the lobby, as I wander downstairs. I should say nothing. Nothing. Instead, I say, "I just got this letter from Jane. She will be staying in Mexico City for a year."

"Is that so? She likes it so much down there?" A look of surprise and even happiness lights up Momma's face. Before I can reply, she says, "I must run," and dashes into the elevator.

I see now what I did not see before. Momma's mind has gone elsewhere. It is not for her to think about my girlfriend or if I go to college or don't go to college. Whether I am ready or not, the time of Momma's concern for me has ended.

Again all news, all the time. 1010 WINS. The armed robbery of a jewelry store in midtown Manhattan. A rapist at loose in the Bronx. The slaying of a family of four in Mineola, Long Island. The threat of famine in sub-Saharan Africa. Fifteen-minute delays on the BQE and longer delays on the Hutch and the Queens Midtown Tunnel and the LIE.

"So how's that girlfriend of yours? Hear from her yet?" Mr. Rowicki asks, at closing time. He has already locked the door and is now emptying the cash register. Mr. Rowicki leaves the drawer open at night so thieves, seeing there is nothing to take, will not break in.

"Yes," I say. All day the store has felt like a refuge.

"There. You see. You got through it. She'll be back in a few days, right?"

"She's not coming back."

“What’s that mean, she’s not coming back?” He has stopped counting the bills.

And so I tell him.

Mr. Rowicki comes out from behind the cash register. “It’s not the end of the world. Believe me, the pain will pass,” he says, patting me on the back and unlocking the door so I can leave.

It is a night for walking. One Hundred Sixth Street, Ninety-Sixth Street, Eighty-Sixth Street. Down Broadway I head, crying as I go.

The next day is another long shift, but at 11 p.m. Mr. Rowicki has me turn off the lights at the back of the store to signal closing time. To empty the store, I lock the front door, allowing customers out but no new ones in, as Mr. Rowicki tallies the day’s take, which he sticks in a zippered deposit bag.

As I head for the door, Mr. Rowicki says, “Stick around. We’ll go get something to eat.”

Through swinging doors we enter the Silver Rail, down on One Hundred Eleventh Street. A dining area behind the bar. A sawdust-strewn floor. Soft lights. The Rolling Stones and Dylan pouring from the jukebox. The happy buzz of the patrons. The slender waitress with her black hair in a ponytail and beautiful oval face and smile that makes me melt as she comes to our booth and takes our order. I have entered another world, one that, if only briefly, deflects my mind from its tortured path.

“It’s a good deal for a buck ninety-nine,” Mr. Rowicki says, of the steak special, a slab of boneless meat that comes with large French Fries and a salad. “So are you still going away to that crummy school up in the sticks?”

“Money’s a problem.” I don’t tell him that the deadline has passed for the college’s

receipt of the first part of the tuition.

"You either have the money or you don't," Mr. Rowicki said, smearing butter on a seeded roll.

I think of the little green savings bank passbook hidden under my sofa. Three hundred dollars. All that stealing from Auntie Eve, and for what?

"You drink that stuff like it's water," Mr. Rowicki says, as I refill the beer stein pouring from the second pitcher the waitress has brought to the table.

"It is water."

"You'll be pissing all night."

What are "haunted, frightened trees"? What is "crazy sorrow"? What is "one hand waving free"? Who sings like that?

The food and drink and ambience seem to soften Mr. Rowicki. He says more about himself in a night than he has in three months. He attended Brooklyn Technical High School, one of the city's four special public high schools. A low grade in French kept him out of City College; by one point he had fallen below the admission requirement. What an unfair and heartbreaking thing, I think, hearing a trace of sorrow in Mr. Rowicki's voice. But wait. Because of one point, he had to wind up working in a bookstore twelve hours a day in dirty clothes? Hearing Mr. Rowicki's hard luck narrative, I give nods of understanding, lying with my face as I have learned to do listening to my brother go on about his life and to Momma about the glory days that had once been ours before the evil Simon Weill came on the scene and ruined everything. Oh, I don't know and I don't care. Let them all lie.

"Why don't you take her home? Go on. It's the only thought you've had in that

empty head of yours since we got here. You think she doesn't know what's going between your ears? She's a woman. Her senses are on high alert. And you won't win any points with her sitting there like Mr. Above It All. You don't knock on the door, no one answers. Trust me," Mr. Rowicki says, after paying the waitress our bill.

Back in my room that night the reality of Jane once more begins to throb like a toothache, eliciting moans I am reasonably sure can only be heard from me.

Dear Jane,

You knocked me down completely with your letter. It is only now that I am able to stand and walk around and approximate a sensible person. But I have some news of my own to announce. I've had a change of plans. I will be staying here in New York City to attend Queens College, which is part of the City University of New York. I applied late to City College and they did not have room for me. But Queens College is a four-year college too, and I will only have to pay \$37.50 a semester, not the giant tuition that Colby College demands. This is a good start to my life, whatever the world may say. Mr. Rowicki thinks so, and so does Mrs. Jacoby, my high school history teacher. But just because I will not be leaving New York City does not mean I will not be leaving my room. I must not stay where decay and death abide. Of this I am sure. However, I am not strong enough to live in Queens, where I fear a different kind of death awaits, the death that oblivion consigns, and so I will be in this room until the time comes when I am not. And that time will come, Jane. Yes it will. I struck a blow for freedom in going to Boston a couple of years ago and Philadelphia this year.

In so doing I have proven that the cities of America exist in something more than my imagination and are within my range. Do not think that I am changing course because of your decision. It is only that reality has bent me to its will. What I couldn't see before I can see now. My family has no money. We are paupers on Mr. Simon Weill's string. Someday I will fight him, and fight him good. Someday I will be the theme of honor's tongue, like Hotspur, but for now I must languish in the rubble of defeat where my life and my tendencies have landed me. My insides are ablaze with pain at not having you and I feel rooted to the spot where our victory and our demise occurred. For now I am being faithful to a time and place that I recognize are no more, but this is the best that I can do. Please do not wound me anymore than you have to with names and places and events. You only make Mexico City sound like a lizard's lair with the tidings that your letters bring.

The approaching fall semester has made the bookstore a madhouse. "Anchor 321...Harper Torch Book 476..." Mr. Rowicki calls out, dispatching me to different parts of the store to meet the customers' requests. Books sell virtually out of the boxes I continually slice open with a matte knife. I have been told by Mr. Rowicki to come in early and expect to stay late all week.

"Will Mr. Crawford be here, too?"

"Don't worry about it," Mr. Rowicki says.

But by noon Mr. Crawford has sauntered in, in his usual maximum cool attire—yellow sports shirt and seersucker trousers and white canvas shoes.

"I'm letting you go, Ned. Here's your paycheck." Mr. Rowicki says, handing Mr. Crawford his pay envelope.

"What do you mean?" The twinkle has gone from Mr. Crawford's eyes.

"I won't be needing you anymore."

I begin to tremble. It is the kind of fear I used to feel when my father, before the amputation, had been made to get up.

"Why?"

"You're lucky I'm paying you at all."

"Who the hell do you think you are, you scrawny bastard?"

"Get out of my store," Mr. Rowicki says, now faced off with Mr. Crawford and chest-bumping the more powerfully built man out the door.

Has Mr. Rowicki caught Mr. Crawford in the act? Has someone seen Mr. Crawford pocketing money and told Mr. Rowicki? Or will Mr. Crawford come to my room in the night and murder me for having snitched, even if I haven't? For the rest of the day, I leave Mr. Rowicki to himself, having seen his fire.

I reach under the convertible sofa for the bank passbook and lie down with it pressed against my chest. Suddenly the path forward to a new freedom and happiness is clear. I don't have to live the small life I have been living; I don't have to be a fearful, petty thief.

Again I reach under the sofa, this time for the two keys. One is for Auntie Eve's apartment, the other for her closet. At the incinerator on the landing, I drop the two keys down the chute. No, they will not be burned, but they will be blackened and shoveled out with the ashes and deposited in metal garbage cans down in the basement, and those

heavy cans will then be carted up the ramp to the street. A Department of Sanitation worker will drag the can with the keys to the back of the truck and dump the can's contents into the vehicle's maw. No one will find those keys, or if they do, many are the locks in New York City. Many, many, many. No one will ever ever come to me and say, "Are these keys yours by any chance?" No one.

"Were you looking for me, my son?" Momma asks, as if she has been waiting for me there at the dining room table.

"I don't know."

"Did you come here to tell me something?"

"No. I don't think so." It has been a mistake. To give her my secrets would be to give her me. I can't afford for her to gain possession of me in that way. I cannot have here render me white as the robe she wears. I cannot be annihilated in her whiteness.

"You can tell me, Gideon. I won't breathe a word."

"No, no. It's nothing. I was just a little hungry," I say, pouring myself a glass of milk from the refrigerator.

"When you are ready, my son, I will be here."

Back in my room, I remember how it was when I lived in the apartment and I would listen for my father's footsteps. Only now it is not my father I anticipate but Momma's soft tread. Lying there in the dark, I remain convinced she can pass through walls and enter my mind, pulling everything out of me in that coaxing voice. I tell myself that the morning will soon come, as waves of fear passed through me.

Dear Gideon,

I've got new for you, Mr. Self-Pity. You're not waiting for me from any great love. You're just afraid of people and afraid of life. You're a private school snob who can no longer afford to be a snob because it's been proven that you're not better than anyone. And when you find out you're not better you run away. You're afraid of people. You're afraid to be bitten. And so you hole up in that room. I will tell you exactly what I want to tell you, Mr. Censor. I went to three parties last week and I'm going to four more this week. How do you like them apples? I guess I'll hear in your next whiny report.

Gusts of wind whip off the river. The cable winds and unwinds around the winch in the elevator shaft. The smell of marijuana is strong as I knock on the red door and Jerry opens it. "Hey, man," he says.

"Who's out there?" Luke's voice comes from somewhere inside.

"It's cool, man. It's just your brother."

Two small rooms separated by a beaded curtain. In one room are a stove and a sink and a table. In the other is the living area where Luke also sleeps.

"Hey, Gideon. Get in here. Didn't I tell you the penthouse was the coolest place?"

The penthouse. A kind of shack with a corrugated tin facade. Up here Luke can almost believe he has nothing to do with the rest of the building.

"It's nice," I say, not for the first time.

"Have a beer, man," Luke said.

"That's all right. Not now," I say. I don't want to drink with them, not during the day.

“Come on. Take it,” Lenny says. “We got lots more.”

“No, really. Not now.”

“Go ahead, man. It’ll take your mind off Jane,” Luke says.

“That’s some wrong shit, Jane going off to Mexico on you like that. You can’t count on no woman to be normal for very long. Sooner or later they do this strange shit. You know what I mean? It’s like they’re born to be unreliable,” Lenny says.

“Did I tell you, man? Lenny and Jerry and me, we’ll be going camping up in the Catskills. We’re going to get a tent and some gear and load up the Bonneville and take off.”

“That’s right, man. Get some of that fresh country air,” Lenny says, after sucking on the weed.

“And I’m going to get a motorcycle,” Luke says.

The roof calls to me, where, in place of the stale air of my brother’s penthouse, cutting smoke and small cinders blow out from the screened chimney top of the incinerator. To the south Broadway curves eastward through the tall, flanking buildings. To the west there is Riverside Park, and beyond, the Hudson River and the golden Palisades. To the east are black-top roofs of buildings and more buildings. And then there is the tall spire of Riverside Church and squat Grant’s Tomb and the silver gray span of the George Washington Bridge, the view north one that often fills me with hope but now just summons dread, as if the world out there has nothing but pain in store.

My father grows more comfortable with his artificial leg and is learning to get around with the aid of a walker. Regularly now he sits on the traffic island in the middle of

Broadway, blissfully unaware of the rampaging vehicles streaking north and south, nor is he drawn by the cooing pigeons at his feet or the idle chatter of the other elderly who occupy the long bench. My father says he is happy to be alive but will be happy to die, as his work on earth is done, and spends much of his time out there with his head bowed in prayer.

My sister Hannah's little boy is now in grade school. For some reason I am not capable of any more interest in him than I am my sister Naomi's daughter Jeanne. A perception that they are doomed to continue the lineage of failure may account for this indifference. The unhealed wounds in relation to my two sisters have colored my view of their progeny.

Twice now in the last year Naomi has overdosed on sleep medications and was sped by ambulance for emergency room care, but she comes back from her stays in the psychiatric ward in good spirits, as if she finds connection there she can't find elsewhere.

As for Rachel, there have been sightings. She has a different look now. The braid is gone. She has dyed her hair with henna, turning it a rich red brown, and wears it short in a duck's ass and has taken to wearing dark glasses. At night she goes to the bars, then tears drunk through the lobby and up to the apartment, where she cries angry, bitter tears in Momma's arms. Momma says Rachel is searching, and that all her children are searching, and that all our various troubles mean that we haven't *found*, and that we will have no peace until we do, and that defeat by the world is often the beginning of the Lord's victory, as we have to be lost before we can be found. "And you are lost. All of you. The world is cutting poor Rachel. It is just cutting her," Momma says.

When I come home from another long day with Mr. Rowicki, Tom Smits is waiting, just inside the lobby.

“So you found me,” I say.

“It’s not like your name is Smith and there are hundreds of you in the phone book.”

I lead him away from the building to the Turk’s place across the street.

“You didn’t return my calls. I must have left five messages for you in the last week.” The summer sun has burned away his pallor.

“Things just kept coming up.” Momma gave me each of the phone messages.

“I spent the summer with my mother and sister down in Martinique. She was doing some more research for her doctorate on the island’s culture. It’s really been hard for her since my father left. There were men who wanted to make her, but she didn’t want to be made. She came back to New York to find the divorce papers waiting for her. It’s kind of hard.”

Made? A mother made? From where comes the freedom to apply such language to a mother? I listen without sympathy. There is no room for that, given Tom’s high numbers, numbers that allow you to play-act at unhappiness when there can be no such thing for people with his gifts. High achievement *is* happiness. Tom will get his bearings soon and regain his strength. Martinique? Tom and his family belong to the world. I and my family belong to One Hundred Thirteenth Street.

“Are you still going to that college up in Maine next month?” Not a real college, just a college up in Maine.

“The money isn’t there.”

"So what are you going to do?"

"I guess I'll go to City College."

"Jesus. Well, it used to have a good reputation."

"Yes." I am talking to Tom about a college he has no respect for when in fact I am not even going to that college but to Queens College, if I am to go to that college at all.

"Let's stay in touch, huh? I really want us to," Tom says. Do I hear a tremble in his voice? Do I see fear and uncertainty in his eyes?

"Of course," I say.

Dear Tom, I am writing this note so finality can have its place. I am an island country. This you must understand. I do not look on invasion lightly. My guns are drawn and the transgressor will be given a hard blow. Do not assume I am in complete poverty, for my resources are many, even if they have not been called upon yet. Know this as well: you are a demoralizing eye, of undetermined origin, on my life, and your laughing thing showers down on me from all directions. Do not approach my shore again. My country is not logical in the matter of restraint. It can turn guns on itself as well as the other. Use every one of those high numbers to grasp my meaning. Gideon

Seated at my desk and with the light from the gooseneck lamp to read by, I check carefully for misspellings or grammatical errors. I do not want to give Tom more reason than he already has to laugh at me or call me illiterate, the tag he applied to poor Mr. Sadowski. Then I fold the note in thirds and place it in an envelope, on which I write

Tom's full name and address in big block letters, so the mailman will not have the excuse of my chaotic scrawl to not make good on delivery. Next I seal the envelope, attach a stamp, and pull on a sweater, as a fall chill is now in the air. My step is slow but decisive as I leave the room. I must not wait until the morning to mail the letter, as delay might prove treacherous to his purpose.

The olive drab mailbox right there on the corner. How solid and reliable. Oh what savage joy to pull on the handle and drop the letter in. Saying, I will show you what I am and who I am, mister. Now will you finally hear.

"We cannot have it. Luke hangs around outside the building with that bum. It looks so terrible. Can you not speak to him?" Momma asks, as I pass through the lobby.

"Speak to him?"

"Have you no ears to hear?"

And yes, as Momma said, Luke and Lenny are out front.

"We're going for a ride. Want to come?" Luke asks.

"Yeah. We'll take you anywhere you want to go," Lenny adds.

"And that's no lie," Jerry chimes in.

Is Lenny, in a white T-shirt and with a red bandanna around his forehead to keep his long black hair out of his face, the one Momma has designated as a bum? He has no job and stays with Luke all the time now. Or is it Jerry, who has dropped out of high school? And what of Luke himself? They all have a kind of bum look.

"No, thank you," I say.

"What's this no thank you shit. It's a car. It's got four on the floor. What, you

don't like cars? They're all around you, man. Wake up."

Yes, wake up. Wake up to the cars all around me.

Mothers are out in the park with their children, who play in the sandbox, as I once played, with their little shovels and pails. See how they flap their arms and laugh. Down the curving staircase into Riverside Park I go to the lower level at One Hundred Sixteenth Street. The day is cool, the kind about which people say, "Fall is in the air." Over the iron fence to Dead Man's Hill I climb. Dappled light filters through the branches of the trees onto the undergrowth.

The cage calls to me. I lift the latch and enter, then pull the door closed and secure the latch. After a while the sound of soft voices comes to me. A girl playfully punches a boy on the arm as they pass by to the top of the hill, where they lie down. Soon they are kissing. The men I had seen crouching behind bushes that first summer with Jane—where are they now? Oh, it does not matter. Pressed up against the chain-link enclosure, I feel as much excitement as any I have ever known and can only wonder whether, in Mexico City, Jane at this very moment is involved in something similar to what I am witnessing.

