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By the author of SEIDMAN AND SON

ELICK MOLL

Memoir of Spring



G. P. Putnam's Sons New York

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Memoir of Spring

1

❧ SPRING is on the way. There are signs and portents. The wind from the harbor this morning is almost mild, pale sun has softened the implacable gray of stone, it glimmers on the spires of the taller buildings and silvers the wake of passing tugs in the river below. It's as if the city's numbed face were crinkling into a smile and there is a leap of expectancy within, for some familiar secret about to be revealed, some ancient promise to be fulfilled.

I'd forgotten this stirring of the blood with the change of season. This has been my first protracted stay away from California in fifteen years. To New Yorkers with visions of lemon blossoms in December and jacaranda trees bluely ablaze in February it would be hard to explain why I chose to exchange these delights for the savageries of a New York winter. The truth is I'm far from clear about it myself. I am at an age when men—some men—with the abrupt shadow

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of mortality athwart their lives, do foolish and unpredictable things. I've lately reread *The Moon and Sixpence* and have thought a good deal about Gauguin and the problems of middle age and artistic conscience and social responsibility. I've also thought about a distant cousin in the cloak and suit line who, several years ago, pushing fifty as the saying goes, abandoned his wife and family to live with a twenty-year-old Japanese girl in Kyoto. I see him, Sam Goldfarb of Seventh Avenue and Flatbush, sitting cross-legged on a *tatami* in a paper house, trying to ignore his aching knees and to hold the remnants of his life together with a pair of chopsticks, and I am not moved to laughter. It is no more strange than that, four months ago, sitting beside my pool in Beverly Hills, with the sun on my face and a new contract (in six figures, as the bankers say) in my lap, I should feel my life a failure and a betrayal, should suddenly want to turn the clock back to the bleak Novembers of my boyhood, the sting of blizzard in my face, frost on windowpanes, slippery sidewalks, honest cold instead of sneaky chill; that I should have gone tramping about Brooklyn, day after day these past months, with an icy-fingered wind reaching for the marrow in my bones, looking for a boy I seem to remember, trying to recapture his image in the shouting voices and rapt incurious eyes of youngsters playing in streets which sometimes bear the same names but are no longer the same streets of my childhood.

It's a strange mood that's been on me. I've stood, shivering, watching with curious pleasure the wry counterpoint

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of porters shoveling snow in front of florists' windows where April bloomed at twelve dollars a dozen; I've relished coming in from out of doors to the overpowering warmth of my small flat gushing from the pipes, rusty-smelling, teakettle shrill. Among the vices I've collected in my forty-odd years is a taste for expensive food expensively served, but I've made no complaint this season about gluey sweet rolls in oily paper bags, underscored with the faint woody flavor of hot coffee out of cardboard containers, swallowed while standing near the radiator, with overcoat on and shoulders still hunched and the numbness tingling away from my face and fingers.

Above all I've courted loneliness, or aloneness, that this city provides so well. I have no phone, I've avoided friends and acquaintances, I've gone alone to the theatre or concerts, I've walked, I've read, I've sat long vacant hours at my piano while winter's bluish dark moved in against the windows, bringing new urgency into the peevish notes of the doormen's whistles in the street below and the answering blurt of taxi horns.

My wife, Eileen—she is my second wife, who curiously enough once played a small part in a movie about Gauguin—has been at home in California. It was agreed between us that this would be a sort of testing period—to see if we need each other, or if we need more not to need each other. (I'm not being obscure; there seems to be no way to say these things simply, without confusing overtones.) At home too are the twenty-nine leather-bound scripts of movie scores

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I've written in the last fifteen years. I've made Eileen a gift of them, whatever happens—the scores, the royalties, the house—all ten rooms and five baths and free-form pool. She thinks I'm crazy. Not charming crazy. Plain crazy. Perhaps I am. If I tell you that Eileen is twenty-seven and quite beautiful and that any hour of the day, with a yawn or a certain slow movement of her hand to her hair, she can make me feel twenty-seven and quite virile, you may think so too. Especially if I add that what appears to have broken up our marriage and sent me to live alone in a two-room apartment, with a piano and a metronome, to prowl the streets of East New York, across the river, day after day, like an expatriated ghost, was a twenty-five-year-old dinner jacket which she inadvertently dug out of a closet when we were moving to our new house in Holmby Hills.

However that may be, crazy or not, I have got through the winter without pneumonia and without recourse to an analyst, or even tranquilizers, albeit somewhat sallow—green as a herring, my grandma would have said—and slightly shriveled in contour, like a mandrake root. Now the season is changing. There is an unmistakable sheen of palest green on the bare branches of the trees in the park and unless it was a mirage or some trick of fancy, I saw a robin there early this morning, practicing pizzicato runs across the crusted earth. And just now, across the street, the lady of the smocks (cerulean this morning) has put out a geranium on her window sill and suddenly, ridiculously,

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my heart is squeezed to the point of tears. Spring is here. The witches' brew of spring. Memory and desire. Eye of newt and hope of heaven. Dreams still young and leaping in the blood, unaware of compromise and caution and cholesterol—young men's dreams; to wrench the inexpressible from sound, to weave it gleam by gleam; to thrust roots down into the deep heart of earth and rise with its secret shattering beat in soaring symphonies to prod the indifferent sky. To be remembered. Remembering, to be remembered.

The lady in the brownstone across the street has caught my eye. She smiles and I am very nearly startled. This is a clear violation of the code for city dwellers. (Frown upon your neighbor as you would have him frown upon you, speak not his name, lest he be encouraged to come knocking for bread, or a cup of sugar or a word of comfort.) It's obvious that spring's witchery has begun its work with her too, moving her to reckless and extravagant behavior. For a few days now she will be slightly mad. She will bound suddenly from her chair to speak words of endearment to her parakeet. She will make lists of all the books she means to read and of forgotten relatives to whom she means to write. Small frenzies of activity will claim her and as suddenly drop her becalmed in a little sea of frustration feeling empty and defeated. With a martini in her hand she will turn on the hi-fi and listen to Schubert's "Ave Maria" and she will remember, perhaps, a young man standing in the doorway with his coat collar turned up, saying good-by. And lacking rosemary and rue to twine into

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her hair, she will go out and buy another geranium for her window sill.

A solitary geranium in a little red pot. Suddenly I am looking down across forty years at a wagon jolting along a Brooklyn street, its sloping sides lined eight deep with pots of the warped little velvety blooms, pink, white, red. The wagon is drawn by a Wizard of Oz horse in a straw bonnet. His name is Solly and the man who walks alongside, calling unmusical attention to his wares—"Jur-on-yoms, fah ten cents, with a pot"—is Mr. Hovick, our ice-man. He is a small man with large worries, a mortgage on his house, a growing family to feed and educate. So he deals, seasonally, in geraniums. He also delivers coal in winter, and at night, the year round, his wagon is for hire to move household goods, or produce from the market or, some say, stolen goods for the auction shops on Pitkin Avenue. But now, with the first thaw, he brings us the lovely lie of immortality in little pots for ten cents. He is our harbinger of spring and we must make do with him because Zephyr with Aurora playing never travels on the BMT and Euphrosyne lives far away in the unimaginable Adirondacks, way past Lake George.

In a few weeks the gypsies will be coming out to the flats and my mother will deliver her annual stricture about staying away from that enticing flame-lit moor after dark. She is abetted by Mr. Sussman, our neighbor. Gypsies, he says, are especially fond of Jewish children because they are less stringy than the Irish and make better soup. Mr. Sussman

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is always making light of serious matters like this; he grows grave only when he discusses with me a bent bicycle wheel or the relative merits of cat's-eyes and clearies. He doesn't seem, by the wildest imagining, a man chosen to play the principal role in a tale of passion and its bitter fruit.

Ghosts stir. Ragweed and clover in the empty lots out toward the Bay. The sadness of daisies on spindling stems, bending in the wind, so soon dust blown and dimmed, beside the old Jamaica road. The noxious smell of clay and rubbish soaked in melting snow, forever enclosing a turgid dream of buried treasure kicked over in rusty cans. Soon the rains will come and the smell of earth in our back yard will become unbearable, and sometimes when I think myself unobserved I will fling myself down on the moist ground and dig my face into it, into that rich, gritty, maddeningly evocative smell, as if I thought I might burrow my way back to the center of my life, to the home from which I'd been forever exiled.

I should tell you something about myself, I think—if you are still there, in lieu of a psychoanalyst—so you can orient yourself, get me in your mind's eye, so to speak, a grown man, very nearly an elderly one, making a *tsimmess*, as my grandma would have said, out of a geranium in a little red pot. My parents were immigrant Jews and I was born on the Lower East Side in New York. We moved from there when I was still an infant; my formative years, as they are sometimes called, were spent between Brooklyn and Chicago, where the matrices had such divergent shapes

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as the Idlehour Movie Palace on Pitkin Avenue, the United Cigar Stores wherever one could be found, the Chicago Musical College on Van Buren, Brown's Pool Parlor and Recreation Hall on Cottage Grove and 63rd, the Gothic turrets and cathedral silence of Harper Library on the Midway and the squalid pavilions of pleasure on South Wabash Avenue.

My way, I perceive, was West, like earlier seekers for gold, leading me ineluctably to Schwab's Drugstore in Skolsky Square, hard by the Hollywood Hills, and to Fox Studios nearby, where, without any irony at all, now that the movie business is dying, oil has been discovered in large quantities. For me, the circle has been completed; I am back on the East Side of New York where I was born—somewhat farther uptown now, in the Sixties—with my piano, the volume of Czerny Exercises I used when I was fifteen, and a sheaf of manuscript paper on which I've failed to make a single notation in four months.

I see that my neighbor in the blue smock is at her window again, dousing her geranium now with water from the tap. The chlorine in the water kills germs and the fluorine in it is very good for teeth. One day, if we continue to progress satisfactorily, new teeth may grow for us in little pots on window sills, instead of velvet-petaled nostalgia. Meanwhile I am back with Solly and his clopping progress along a Brooklyn street whose name I have forgotten. I was looking for it the other day. But it's gone. I couldn't find it. (This is what the psychologists call "a

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block," I understand. I am unable to remember the name of a block in my past because of a block in my present.) At any rate I couldn't find a home for the hundred heart-squeezing forms rising like the shades of murdered loves from weed-grown cemeteries in my mind. My Uncle Ben, my poor skinny Uncle Ben, in his shabby blue bathrobe, coughing his deprecatory cough (it was he who made me a present of that tuxedo, so long ago); my Uncle Phil is there on the street with no name, sitting on the porch of our house with his feet up on the rail, his brows knitted over the complexities of a Racing Form. And there is the laughing face of Mr. Sussman, our neighbor, and the tall spare figure of his wife, Naomi, and Leonard Geiss, my friend and part-time enemy, and Moe Finkelstein and Mrs. Davidoff, the pretzel lady, and my Aunt Minnie and my Aunt Rose, and Miriam, lovely Miriam—and suddenly Mab, who doesn't belong there at all but in Chicago—and not even there completely but in the Sunday Supplement, her hand resting on the bonnet of a Pierce Arrow, or on the mane of a curveting thoroughbred—Mab, moving always to the strains of Debussy—"The Girl with the Flaxen Hair"—a wisp of entrancing melody in a high-waisted Empire gown and hair piled high—Queen Mab, Princess Mab—Lord. We wish vain things. For Orpheus's lute. For the harps of angels to wake the echoes of worlds that lie buried under attic ruins, under faded street signs, long-vanished nickel shows, in small rugs that came in packages of Turkish cigarettes, in the taste of hot peas in oiled paper cones.

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For the innocence of childhood—which was no innocence at all, perhaps, only a sweet smiling mask for the shadow forms of wolves growing up within us too, playful and wide-eyed as ourselves, waiting for the claws to sharpen, for the fangs that really draw blood.

Mr. Hovick was a rectangular little man, as I recall, about five feet high and two wide, with bright blue eyes, red hair and an honest, ruddy face all in one plane. He wore to business a blackish suit which in its original state had been a gray cardigan sweater and a pair of corduroys, but had acquired over the years the texture and appearance of very old cracked leather. It had also acquired a distinctive reek of damp straw, horse and honest toil which wouldn't do for the new Aromarama movies, I suppose, but which seemed not unpleasant to us, trailing Mr. Hovick down our hall with a fifty-pound cake of ice on his shoulder.

He always timed his arrival for the precise moment when my mother finished "straightening the house." (That was the term housewives in our neighborhood used and it was well chosen for the unkempt and unmannerly intensity of our living. What we children could do to a parlor in fifteen minutes couldn't be matched by a mounted regiment of hussars; the tides of joy and despair, of outraged love and loving outrage that swept our homes, hour by hour, were fit to buckle the walls and unseat the chandeliers. A simple gathering of the clan, or a pinochle game, produced enough

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dishevelment and debris to suggest a holocaust in any reasonably decorous society. What our houses needed, after an average day's living, most aptly, was "straightening.")

No one would have dreamed of asking Mr. Hovick to use the back door. He was our friend. My mother would sometimes try to outwit him by switching her cleaning routine from morning to afternoon, or vice versa. It never worked. Mr. Hovick had a sixth sense. Whatever time of day it might be, no sooner had she given the sofa cushions their final admonitory slap than Mr. Hovick would appear, as if by magic, and she would stand by helplessly, balanced between laughter and exasperation, while the little man came running through the hall toward the kitchen, with that birdlike, hoppy stride of his, always in a hurry, always sweating, cheerfully trailing ice water over the newly vacuumed rug and the scrubbed linoleum and calling out briskly, inimitably, "Haryado haryado, very clean day today, very clean vetter oussite."

Sometimes, of course, the vetter wasn't so clean. We got some fairly maculate days out there at the tip of Brooklyn. At such times, Mr. Hovick would confine himself simply to "haryado." If someone complained, conversationally, that it was a foul day, he would shake his head sympathetically and say "ach" or "tsk" but that was as far as he would go. I like to think he was fundamentally so kindhearted that he couldn't bear to bring himself to speak harshly even about our Brooklyn climate, which is

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probably the most villainous in the world outside of the Aleutians. But perhaps it was only that his command of English was precarious and talk about bad weather tended to get complicated. It rained or misted, the sky would be overcast, with a hint of snow in the air, it might be muggy or cloudy or blowy or damp. . . . Fine weather entailed no such complications. When the sun shone, it was simply a clean day and Mr. Hovick's heart was glad, and ours with him.

Mr. Hovick is gone and, for all my nostalgia, I have no quarrel with the Frigidaire Company for doing him in, with all his unsanitary ilk, as I am unable to revile Mr. Freud for adding to the familiar pictures in my album the faces of eyeless Oedipus and raging Medea. I'm all for more sanitation and fewer illusions. I feel certain, despite the sad statistics of dope addiction and delinquency, that the new generation of young people is generally sounder, physically and mentally, than we were. I'm sure that boys today masturbate in greater comfort and with more peace of mind than was possible in my day. But I wonder sometimes if they have as much fun. For me there is a faint hospital smell that seems to hang over their lives. I suppose this is the inevitable concomitant of better mental health. But somehow it depresses me.

When I visit my two sons (by my former wife) I am impressed by their size and the uncomplicated directness of their thinking. They know me to be an early mistake of their mother's but they bear me no grudge, though they

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are frank to admit they would have preferred not to have the problem of being half Jewish. I don't think they will require psychoanalysis. As far as I can see it's not their home that has been broken, but mine. I think they will be better men than I am, better citizens, better friends with themselves. It's absolute nonsense, therefore, for me to feel saddened on their account that all they will ever know about ice in their lifetime is the cloudy chlorinated cube expelled by electronic peristalsis from the bowels of a refrigerator. To wonder what they can ever have known of childhood's slow-burning magic, never having hooked a ride on the back of an ice wagon, or reached into the damp straw for slivers of divinely cold ammoniated crystal, never having flirted with typhoid in scoops of shaved ice doused with cherry-flavored benzoate of soda, never having plucked greasy black strands from Solly's tail to make horsehair rings—I can't imagine what my own boyhood would have been like without these delights, with only the discreet and soulless hum of a Frigidaire substituting for Mr. Hovick's cheery greeting and Solly's velvety nose.

Solly was the apple of Mr. Hovick's eye. If the expression "working like a horse" means anything, it was Mr. Hovick who worked like a horse and Solly who lived like a gentleman. I say gentleman only out of deference to the memory of Mr. Hovick. An inspection of the kind children are always making had early established the fact that Solly was no gentleman at all. She was a run-of-the-mine bay mare—somewhat more run-of-the-mine than

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most, I'm afraid. She was past the first flush of her youth, her back had a dip in it the size of a small roller coaster, her ears were suspiciously long and the skin over her joints looked a little moth-eaten. But she was a lovable beast all the same and it is said that one who truly loves, cherishes his beloved's faults along with her excellences. Solly was pampered and cherished, if ever a horse was that had to work for a living too. She was always dressed in the height of fashion: in summer she wore a dashing straw hat with a red tassel hooked over her floppy ears; in winter she sported a heavy woolen blanket, very nobby. She was regularly curried and combed and manicured. She ate mighty well (in between whiles she would nibble the bark off the trees that lined our street). She got more apples and sugar than were good for her and in general lived pretty much the life of Riley.

We children shared Mr. Hovick's devotion to Solly but my Uncle Phil, who kept a stable of bookies in those days and regarded himself, in consequence, as something of a judge of horseflesh, was more critical. He would sit on the porch, balanced between a toothpick and a nail file, and observe Mr. Hovick and his steed approach, with the permanent agnostic gleam in his eye of one who has spent some of the best years of his life watching the Daily Double daily vanish like swamp fire. The results from Jamaica didn't begin to come in until about two and there is a limit to how much you can file your nails. So Uncle Phil

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found time to figure out why he'd miscalculated on the last race, to weigh the probabilities of clear track on the morrow, to discuss philosophy and parlays and similar abstruse matters with the local characters and to think up uncomplimentary remarks about Solly.

"That's a horse?" he would say. "I've seen bottles of LePage's glue that looked more like a horse than that. Listen. When are you going to get the old girl a girdle? She's scraping bottom already."

There was nothing malicious about it. It was just the bored, kidding talk of one horseman to another. The trouble was that it was all one-sided. Mr. Hovick was no hand at repartee in any language and he certainly wouldn't venture out onto the thin ice of racing parlance where my uncle, a Yankee of ten years' standing, skated with the greatest of ease. So he endured these slurs in pained silence. But one day Uncle Phil went too far. "You know, Hovick," he said, "you're taking chances with a valuable animal. That's not a swayback any more. That horse is coming apart at the seams. Why don't you tie something around her from front to back so you shouldn't find her walking away from herself one of these days?"

Mr. Hovick put down his wooden pail and his ice tongs and in colorful, Biblical prose came to Solly's defense. It was probably the longest speech he ever made. He said, with justice, that sitting by a telephone and saying "damn it" does not make one a connoisseur of horses. He said that

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if my uncle really knew one end of a horse from another he would long ago have realized that Solly was a "thoroughfare."

"A thoroughfare," my uncle echoed raucously. "You mean an alley, don't you?"

Yes, a thoroughfare, Mr. Hovick insisted. He had the papers to prove it. Solly, in her day, had romped around a track with the best of them.

Poor Mr. Hovick. It was sheer, unbridled fantasy. Even his simple heart could not have believed for a moment that Solly was ever a race horse—even in a previous incarnation. But who that has ever owned a mangy dog or a spavined horse or a sweetheart with a big nose, will not understand the grief and pride that betrayed Mr. Hovick into this extravagance?

For a moment my Uncle Phil was speechless. There are some things that are so funny they can only be taken seriously. He demanded to see proof of Solly's fleet-footed youth. Mr. Hovick faltered and then said, with dignity, that he felt under no obligation to prove anything to my uncle. It was enough that he, Mr. Hovick, and Solly knew the truth. And with this he picked up his bucket and tongs and retired behind a hundred-and-fifty-pound cake of ice.

The matter did not end there. My uncle was not one to let an opportunity like this get away from him. It happened that there was a certain Mr. Kaplowitz who toured our neighborhood with a fruit wagon drawn by a raw-boned gelding of uncertain vintage named Mike. Solly and

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Mike roomed at the same livery stable and there was, I surmise, some tension already existing between their owners concerning the relative merits of geldings and she-horses, and possibly fruit wagons and icewagons too. At any rate, my Uncle Phil took a hand and before long had whipped the thing up into the proportions of a feud. The air of Brooklyn is somehow conducive to rivalries, as anyone who has ever seen or been an umpire at Ebbetts Field will testify. Apparently not even our amiable little iceman was immune, for one day my uncle came in to announce gleefully that Kaplowitz and Hovick were going to race their horses on Sunday, for a purse of fifteen dollars.

My father was incredulous. "Go on," he said. "Who's going to put a saddle on that animal?" He was talking about Solly.

"Who's talking about saddles?" my uncle said. "This is a sulky race."

"Sulky race!" my father exclaimed. He knew a thing or two, he was not above putting down a two-spot on the ponies now and again. "A fine sulky race—between a fruit wagon and an icewagon!"

"All right," said my uncle with an impatient gesture. "So it's a heavy sulky race. What are you so technical?"

The news of the contest spread like wildfire. Everybody took sides. There hadn't been such a furor in our neighborhood since the Steinberg fire. Mr. Hovick still made his daily rounds as usual, hopping and inarticulate, but we could see that he was in a state of high nervous excitement.

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Only Solly seemed unmoved by the flurry she'd occasioned. She stood and meditated, she flopped an ear, switched her tail, moved in slow cadences from stop to stop, archaic but sound, like a Sousa march.

The day of the contest dawned, bright but not early. It dawned on a fine Sunday in June about seven o'clock in the evening, which was the earliest that either of the contestants could conclude his rounds. As might be expected, the occasion had roused the spirit of enterprise in our business-minded community. The little brown man who sold sweet potatoes from a portable stove on wheels was on hand and a brigade of small carts trundled after him through the streets, vending hot peas, scraped ice doused with sweet syrup, frankfurters, also socks, garters and neckties. Mrs. Davidoff was there with her basket of pretzels. Myron Pelz, whose family had come over from Poland a few years before and who epitomized in his skinny, ten-year-old frame the Jewish immigrant's implacable drive to make his fortune in a new land, showed up with a stock of Dodgers pennants.

It was actually a flash of the business acumen that was to make Myron later a very wealthy man but in this case he had miscalculated. What he had construed as the American passion for baseball was, with us boys in the neighborhood, only a passion for the pictures of the players that came in packages of Sweet Caporal cigarettes. It was not baseball at all but collectors' mania that ruled our lives at the time. It embraced as well the tiny tapestries that came

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with Turkish Trophies and the Flags of All Nations with Helmars. The challenge lay in hanging around the cigar stores after school and Saturdays and wheedling the precious souvenirs from the customers for free. We would have thought twice about paying ten cents for a ticket to a world series game, let alone a Dodgers pennant. That was the price of admission at the Idlehour Movie Palace on Pitkin Avenue or a gallery seat at Keith-Proctor's Orpheum and the relative merits of these attractions just weren't to be discussed.

As for the older people, when they said bums about the Dodgers or any other baseball players, they didn't mean lovely bums they meant just bums, who were either on their way to or from reform school. The sporty element, like my Uncle Phil, couldn't be bothered with the game. As a spectacle, that is. It was all right to play a little catch, sand lot ball was not unknown, a bet on the world series was always in order but to *shlepp* out to Ebbetts Field or the Polo Grounds, and stand in line, just to *watch* an ordinary baseball game? That was for yokels. *Goyim*. The true sports divided their time among the three P's—ponies, pool and pinochle.

At any rate, Pelz Enterprises would have been skunked that day of the race if Mr. Sussman who was there with his niece Miriam hadn't stepped in. He must have sensed the financial disaster outlined in deepening blue alongside Myron's pinched nose and with his characteristic generosity—or quixotism if you prefer—he bought Myron's en-

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tire stock of pennants and handed them around. The day was saved for Myron but this didn't stop the significant nudgings and whisperings that already were following uncle and niece about. Miriam had only been living with the Sussmans for a few weeks and as yet there was no actual gossip on which rumor could feed. It was just that the girl was too beautiful merely to accept. You had to bow down or throw rocks, depending on the state of grace of your soul. And on this score it is instructive to remember that the crowd claps its hands in approval but its true, deep-throated roar is almost always for blood.

I myself was obscurely angry with Mr. Sussman that day, I remember. It had something to do with Miriam and those whisperings, or with her being sixteen and my being eleven, or possibly with the fact that Mr. Sussman had been kind of an idol of mine and idols have no right to wobble, even in winds not of their own making. Anyway, when he came up to offer me a pennant I made some surly remark and turned away. Thirty years later, the remembrance of that mean, caitiff's gesture still has power to sicken me.

The course laid out for the race was over two furlongs, or blocks, on unpaved street which is now part of Linden Boulevard. Julius Kaplowitz, Jr., was up for the Kaplowitz stables and one of Mr. Hovick's sons, Norman, was to carry his father's colors to victory. At the last minute, however, Mr. Hovick changed his mind and took the reins himself. He couldn't bear to trust Solly's sensitive mouth to any hand but his own.

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The contestants, of course, weren't speaking. That was supposed to be part of the fun but oddly enough, an undertone of real tension had spread among the spectators. It broke out in loud squabbling and even a fist fight or two. The smart money was down on Mike, but many of us who felt a bond of sympathy with Mr. Hovick had backed Solly with everything we had. Feeling was running pretty high.

Uncle Phil had conceived a novel idea for the getaway. He set a cannon cracker under each wagon and appointed two deputies to set them off simultaneously. At the explosion Mike was off to a fair start and, plentifully belabored by Julius, managed to work himself into a disheveled canter. But Solly seemed hardly to have noticed the noise at all. She was, I fear, a little deaf. She moved forward a few feet, stopped and settled her haunches for the customary wait. Mr. Hovick lifted the reins and let them fall ever so gently. Solly switched her tail and stood there. Mr. Hovick leaned forward and spoke to her. She began to walk. He joggled the reins and tried to carom her off into a trot with a kind of frantic buttock-English. Solly didn't get the idea at all. She ambled a few paces and stopped, looking expectantly to the side to see if her master had decided to quit this foolishness and get down off the wagon and go somewhere, respectably, with a piece of ice.

Mike was already halfway down the first block and going strong. Mr. Kaplowitz was jumping up and down in unsportsmanlike glee. The crowd, from sympathetic

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shouts of encouragement at first, had begun to mutter. We all liked Mr. Hovick but a lot of us who had let sentiment get the better of our judgment were beginning to regret it. I stood to lose a quarter myself and I felt pretty bitter about it.

Mr. Hovick whispered, cajoled, clucked, pushed—all to no avail. Disgusted taunts began to fill the air. "Get her a wheel chair. . . . Get a horse. . . . What a nag. . . ." My Uncle Phil came running up. "Use the whip," he hollered. "Get her started."

Mr. Hovick's face blanched at this suggestion. There was a whip in a rusty sheath at the side of the wagon but it was an accessory, merely, like the tassel on Solly's hat. Mr. Hovick wouldn't have dreamed of using it. But the noise and confusion had begun to unsettle him. He brought himself to lift the reins and slap them against Solly's rump. Startled, she went forward a few paces, at a gait somewhat resembling a trot, then she stopped again and turned sideways altogether, flashing her master a look more puzzled and reproachful than indignant.

"Use the *whip*," my Uncle Phil screamed. "Use the *whip*." Poor Mr. Hovick. His honest flat face was covered with sweat and a look of pain, real pain. It was Solly's reputation he was worried about, you may be sure, not his own. The jeers were coming thick and fast. He looked despairingly at my uncle, who grabbed the whip, wrenched it out of its socket and handed it to him. Mr. Hovick looked at it for a moment as Abraham must have looked at the

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acrificial knife. Then he raised it and brought it smartly down across Solly's flank.

The result was startling. The old pampered darling re-acted as if a shower of bricks had fallen on her. She plunged wildly into the air almost upsetting the wagon and unbling Mr. Hovick back inside, out of view. Then she came down on all fours and was off like a shot. When we saw Mr. Hovick next he was standing against the buck-board, holding the reins, swaying perilously like a char-oteer of old.

Solly won the race by half a furlong. She was halfway to Canarsie before Mr. Hovick could stop her and bring her back. His face was a study as he got down. He couldn't bring himself to look at Solly. The crowd was wildly excited. Someone hung a tattered lei of dandelions around Solly's neck. Mrs. Davidoff offered her a pretzel. A small boy excitedly stuck a Dodgers pennant into her collar. Solly just stood there shivering a little, looking at her master with a glazed, uncomprehending eye. Suddenly she sighed heavily, sank to her knees, rolled over slowly and expired.

For a moment Mr. Hovick was unable to take in the catastrophe. He knelt down beside the horse, spoke to her pleadingly. "Come on, Solly," he said. "Get up." He rugged at her. "Don't be foolish. I didn't mean it." Finally it penetrated. He stood up, looked around dazedly. My Uncle Phil was standing with a group of sobered spectators, looking on uncomfortably. Mr. Hovick walked over

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to him, lifted his work-hardened fist as if it were a mallet and drove it into his face. Then he went back and sat down beside Solly and thought, I suppose, of a lot of things, as one does at the death of a friend.

It's to my Uncle Phil's credit that when his jaw was in working order again, he sought out Mr. Hovick and tried to make amends. "It shows you," he said. "Even an expert can be fooled. I was dead wrong about Solly. That was a thoroughbred. In spades."

Somewhat shamefacedly he forced some money on Mr. Hovick for the purchase of another mount. In a few days Mr. Hovick appeared on his rounds with a horse named Molly. To the casual observer it might have seemed the same horse all over again, the same swayback, the same floppy ears, the same beige mohair effect about the joints. But you could see it wasn't the same for Mr. Hovick. At this time of life you don't form new relationships easily. There was a certain sad reserve in his manner toward Molly. And now whenever the wind blew in from Jamaica Bay bringing the odor of spent fish to our nostrils and the dank grayness of dead time to our Brooklyn skies, if one of us remarked on the dismal character of the weather, Mr. Hovick would glance heavenward and sigh. "Yes. Not so clean today," he'd agree reluctantly. "Not very clean vetter oussite."

2

✿ Most families in our neighborhood were sent to “the mountains,” meaning the Catskills, for at least part of the summer. The husbands would come up weekends, by West Shore train or, more hardily, by touring car, a journey of ninety miles through the jungles of Ulster and Sullivan counties, and across the Wurtzboro Hill, a Himalaya that towered perhaps two thousand feet and could seldom be negotiated without skid chains, boiling radiators and tow trucks. One of our really adventurous neighbors, a Mr. Eisenberg, once arrived at Mountain View on a rainy Saturday evening in July, on a Harley Davidson motorcycle that locked its brakes at the entrance and skidded fifty feet up to the porch outside the dining room where the ladies always sat rocking after supper, taking in lungfuls of the healthful country air and stuffing the last morsels of desert down their progenies’ gullets. Mr. Eisenberg landed

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in a neat parabola at his wife's feet, in a confusion of goggles, gloves, gravel, sponge cake and lamentations.

The Mountain View House was a small and lovely summer resort near Fallsburg whose clientele consisted of several hundred Jewish families, most of them from our own neighborhood in Brooklyn. Jews will go anywhere at the drop of a hat, but once there, they want to know where the nearest Jew is. In consequence, Mr. Foster, the proprietor, a good Presbyterian who had probably started out unwittingly renting a lodging for the night to a passing motorist named Bernstein, soon found himself serving bagels and lox and smoked whitefish for Sunday breakfast, enlarging his quarters, hiring a Hungarian chef and finally being given, by Mr. Sussman, on his birthday, a *yarmalka* affectionately inscribed by the "regulars" together with an honorary certificate of circumcision and a lifetime subscription to Silver's Turkish Baths on New Lots Road.

Financially, Mr. Foster had reason to be happy about the way the Israelites had taken his establishment over but in addition he had a quirk. He liked us. I remember him saying once to my father that he hoped his son Roy would one day marry a Jewish girl so that his grandchildren at least wouldn't be so damn dull. Mr. Foster's neighbors didn't share his enthusiasm, however. You couldn't travel far in that region at that time without seeing a sign that read NO JEWS OR DOGS ALLOWED. Mr. Foster wasn't one to keep his counsel about that sort of thing and at a tempestuous meeting of the City Council in Fallsburg in which

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I believe some noses were bloodied, he tendered his resignation and thereafter, at the entrance to his establishment there was a sign that read BIGOTS AND KLUXERS STAY OUT. ALL OTHERS WELCOME. He was a good man, Mr. Foster. May his tribe increase.

I'm thinking now of the summer of the blueberries and Augustus and of my Lost Lady, Grace. I don't know what strange circumstance led her to Mountain View House. It occurs to me only now that Mr. Foster's sign may have stopped her at the entrance, in her red roadster, to wonder. In amusement, certainly. She couldn't have believed the implied promise of the words; she wasn't naïve. And once inside, the sight of all these daughters of Jerusalem couldn't have reassured her. She'd worked in the garment trade in New York, as a model, and she must have known that two thousand years of Christian charity have not made Jews more tolerant, only more nervous. But she had a wry sense of humor, Grace, and she was stubborn. Maybe that was why she stayed on, a lily among thorns. Or maybe it was, as she said, that for her one place was like another. Or maybe it was that we were in love.

I was nine that summer. Some months before, the virus designed by providence for children and named for them, had left one of my legs partially paralyzed; I had a brace on it when we went up to Mountain View. Jewish mothers of that era had a fanatic belief in the magical properties of country air, raw eggs and milk fresh from cows' udders. To this day, just the label on a bottle of milk gives me the

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shudders. But in other respects my mother was a sensible woman. Uncharacteristically, she did not hover over me, trembling for a misstep, feeding my sense of loss and infirmity. She left me a good deal to my own devices, recognizing that I must make my own adjustments. And it was thus that one day, about half a mile down the creek that ran past Mountain View House, I crossed a hanging bridge that swayed perilously over a boiling torrent perhaps six inches deep and came upon Eldorado, glittering in the sun.

It was a field of blueberries and if you know about blueberries, you know they grow on low bushes with waxy green leaves that shield them, for slow ripening, from the sun. It required a movement or two of my scuffed shoe in the bushes to reveal the delicately powdered blue clusters. Then suddenly I was standing in the midst of incredible wealth. Perhaps it harked back to those old dreams of kicking over a rusty can in an empty lot and finding it filled with rubies or pieces of eight. Perhaps it was only that my child's certainty of the world as an inexhaustible treasure chest of pleasant surprises had been rudely shaken that spring. Anyway the sense of discovery was something tremendous. I felt as if I'd blundered on the Cave of the Forty Thieves, the gold of the Incas, the latest outcropping of the Comstock lode. It was a while before I could begin to make plans. I just stood there, transfixed with the magnitude of my good fortune. Then I flung myself down and began to gather my riches, wildly. I filled my

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cap and my handkerchief and was wondering about what else I could use, if maybe I ought to build a cache. As with all prospectors struck by gold-fever, the passion was pure. It hadn't occurred to me to eat a single berry.

Finally, exhausted and a little feverish, I looked up and saw the lady nobody talked to. She was walking along with her head down, her face nearly hidden under her wide floppy hat, swinging her parasol at the bushes. I'd seen her the day she roared up the gravel path to Mr. Foster's Office in her Stutz Bearcat and I'd observed her at various times since, in the dining room, in the social hall. There were a number of things about Grace that were different: her dresses, her hats, her beautiful red hair—titian, it was called in those days. There was something about her walk, too; the way she gave in to gravity a little at the hips—not grudging and stiff or else merely sloppy like most of the other ladies in the place. And there was something about the way those ladies, my mother among them, froze up whenever Grace was around that leant her an attractive, if troubling, air of mystery.

I watched her as she came toward me now, head down, swinging her parasol like a hockey stick. She was quite close before she saw me. She stopped and we looked at each other. I think at the moment I was a little afraid of her. Or maybe it was an obscure kind of embarrassment. As for her, she'd no doubt got so used to the idea of people not talking to her that she didn't stop to consider I was just a nine-year-old boy, with no need to put her in the stocks

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because I was fearful or jealous. We remained for a long moment staring at each other. Then I caught a whiff of her perfume and came to my senses. Surely nobody who looked that pretty and smelled so fine could be really dangerous. I said hello.

"Hello," she said, accenting it a little, unconsciously, as if surprised that I had spoken at all. She looked at me now all over, and smiled. "What you doin'?"

I showed her the berries.

"Say," she exclaimed. She stooped over to examine my treasure and then looked around appreciatively. "This is a bunk, for fair, isn't it? How'd you find it?"

I shrugged, as if I'd been finding this sort of thing every day.

"Can I pick some too?" she asked.

"Sure." They were mine, of course, but I held the world in my cupped hands just then and I could afford to be generous. We went around picking, exclaiming now and again about some particularly rich vein we'd come upon. Finally, when we couldn't carry any more, we washed the berries in the clean cold water of the creek and crammed them into our mouths in handfuls.

"Hey, we're going to turn blue if we keep this up," Grace said finally, and I found that idea somehow very funny and I laughed and started hiccuping and Grace hit me on the back a few times and I upchucked a mouthful of berries unexpectedly and that started Grace laughing (a wonderful merry laugh she had, like sleighbells bouncing

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on silk) and for some reason, every time we looked at each other now we kept laughing harder and harder until I was rolling in anguish on the ground.

That was how it started. We saw each other almost every afternoon after that. We never planned beforehand where we were going to meet but somehow we always did. There was a new sense of expectancy in my days, I had the feeling of carrying about a valuable secret and there was always a leap of pleasure in the sight of Grace coming down the road to meet me or sitting beside our bridge, as if she'd somehow known she would be, waiting for me and doing something ineffably graceful meanwhile, like smoothing her skirt, or dropping pebbles in the water, or taking the pins from her red-gold hair to shake it loose in the sun.

She was such fun to be with, so good to look at and so generally wonderful that, more and more, I was mystified about what the other ladies at Mountain View had against her. I finally asked her about it. We were sitting at the edge of the creek, under the bridge, watching the minnows and tadpoles play tag around the willow reeds.

"Why don't they like you?" I said bluntly.

Grace picked up a handful of pebbles. "Who?" she said.

"The people at the House. The ladies. . . ."

She started to throw the pebbles at the water. "Don't they?" she said.

"Maybe it's because you're prettier than they are."

"Think so?" she said, giving her head a toss.

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"Why don't you go to some other place? Maybe they be nicer to you some other place." I tried to sound as if we were considering the idea impersonally, but I was a little tense waiting for her reply. I didn't want Grace to go anywhere else, ever.

"It wouldn't be any different anywhere else," she said.

"But *why*?" I persisted.

"Well, I'll tell you," Grace said, leaning back on her hands. "It's like this. I'm a menace. A menace to society. . . ."

I thought of the Clutching Hand, and I looked at Grace and laughed. But I was troubled, too. I knew there was something more in this than a joke.

"Sure," Grace said. "I'm the image of their secret shame. I'm the dreams they can't face in the morning. I'm the lamb whose throat must be cut on the altar stone of Respectability. I'm She who must be stoned. I'm all the things but I'm also elusive and fragile as thistle-down and they spoke to me or smiled at me they'd break the spell you see, and I'd disappear like a puff of smoke. I'd be just another woman like themselves. Pouf. Like that," Grace said.

Or maybe she didn't. Maybe I'm just saying it for her to know she did say something about her shoes. "I'm kind of fond of good-looking shoes," Grace said, and she showed me the ones she was wearing, pert and snub-nosed, with brown and white pony-skin tops. "Twenty-two buck," she said.

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"Gee," I said.

"Yeah," Grace said.

There was another reason why I loved Grace, besides the fact that she was so companionable and jolly. Ever since I'd got the brace for my leg everybody was always being careful for me—they would always be stopping to ask was I tired, did it bother me, did I want to rest? But not Grace.

"Come on," she'd say while we were walking along. "You're slow as molasses," just as if there was nothing at all the matter. Only she'd always walk slowly, and every once in a while she'd stop and say, "Phew, I'm bushed. I'm going to rest up for a minute."

"I'm not tired," I'd say, just as a matter of form, and she'd look at me very seriously and say, "Well, I am. And it's all right to get tired once in a while, you know. Even Robert the Bruce got tired." She'd make me lie down with my head in her lap and she'd tell me about sore-beset Bruce and the spider, or Hercules and his seven labors, or Jason and the Golden Fleece. She'd read a lot. Don't let anybody tell you her kind only read *True Confessions*. Her voice, for me, made poems of everything she said and she'd go on like that for hours, smoothing my hair away from my forehead, laughing sometimes and giving me a hug when I'd interrupt to make some comment that she thought was cute. And sometimes, for appearance's sake, I'd wriggle and make believe I wasn't liking it.

"Hey," I'd say, "don't get mushy. I'm no baby."

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And she'd say, seriously, "Of course you're not. But it's all right to *act* like a baby once in a while. Bigger guys than you do it. You're not so tough."

Once she took me for a ride in the Stutz. We drove to the Village and had a soda in the drugstore and Grace gave me a dollar to pay the cashier. "You're the man," she said, "you've got to pick up the tab." That was the day I decided I had to make something of myself when I grew up. To own a Bearcat and have my own dollar to pay for the sodas I would buy for Grace.

When we got back my mother was angry with me. She said she didn't want me disappearing like that ever again. She didn't want me riding in that crazy automobile, it was dangerous. I didn't even argue with her. I turned a stony face and a deaf ear to her words. It was the first time I knew that my mother and I lived in different worlds, that when it came to other women I would have to treat her as a stranger, perhaps even an enemy.

Only once Grace asked me about my leg. She put her hand on the brace and looked at it for a while and then she said, "How did it happen?"

I told her about the sickness.

She didn't say anything for a few minutes, just kept her hand on the brace. Finally I heard her say, softly, as if she were speaking to someone very near and yet far off, herself perhaps, some part of herself out across time, "If I were any good. If I were any good at all," she whispered.

It gave me a queer feeling—though I didn't get it then. I think I know what she meant now. I think she meant that

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if a person were good enough—good *enough*—he could grow an inch of shriveled bone back into a boy's thigh from his own. But it doesn't work that way. A few years later a blaspheming surgeon, who didn't believe in anything but germicides and sharp knives and cash in advance fitted a piece of silver plate into my hip, and ever since I've walked quite well—you can hardly tell the difference. Maybe it's that we've come such a long way from Galilee. I don't know. I just know that Grace *was* good enough—and nothing happened that afternoon.

Sometimes over the weekend, when Grace was occupied with some friend other than myself (I was jealous of those friends), I would spend the time with Roy, Mr. Foster's son. Roy was thirteen and big for his age and it was a condescension that he bothered with me at all. But, perhaps on orders from his father, he suffered my company and my city-bred ignorance as he went about his chores or on forays into the woods. One time when he was going out to hunt woodchucks with a new .22 rifle, he took me along. I had seen woodchucks that Roy had killed before—sloppy-looking beasts they were, like overgrown rats. I knew that they destroyed things and I was anxious to see Roy knock one over with his rifle. But we tramped around quite a while without even seeing one, and finally Roy got impatient and took a pot shot at something in a tree. I couldn't see what it was he was aiming at, but I saw it fall to the ground, straight down, like a small rock. We went over to investigate. It was a tiny bird, black and white.

"Chickadee," Roy said.

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It lay there, a little puff of feathers, with two tiny pink spindly legs curling up from its dead body.

"That's a pretty small thing to hit from thirty yards," Roy said. He was waiting for me to say something admiring. It *was* a good shot, but all I could think of was that this was no woodchuck, this was a tiny feathered thing, a chickadee, a *chickadee*—a tiny innocent feathered creature—and dead now, dead, and some part of me was down on its knees before it, holding it, crying, and all I could think of to say was, "But it's so little." I wanted to hit Roy, I wanted to say "God damn you" and kick him and smash his face in, and all I could say was, "It's so little."

I didn't want any part of Roy after that. But he had given me a glimpse of the fascinating life that went on around the barn and on my own sometimes I would go down there now with some sugar or an apple for the horses, or scraps for the chickens. These last I brought not for the benefit of the greedy, quarrelsome hens but so I could observe the behavior of the Sultan of this harem, a black Leghorn rooster, very proud, arrogant, very sure of himself and his place in the world. He would never deign to join the scramble for the food I threw to the hens. If a tidbit fell near him he might give it a lordly peck and swallow it. But what I waited for—and it would always happen—was for an argument to start among his flock over some morsel. His Majesty (I called him Augustus in my mind, after Caesar) would watch the unseemly bickering for a moment or two, then he would make his way toward

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his squabbling females; suddenly you'd see a flash of movement and a couple of the hens would go phlumping away across the yard like feathered footballs, squawking as if they'd been stabbed. But you realized the discipline was just. He wanted it understood that nobody was going to make a pig of himself when he was around.

I felt an odd kind of pride in Augustus, and a kind of proprietorship too, having named him, and I brought Grace down to the barnyard to show him off. He was really a magnificent specimen. His plumage was glossy black with a bluish sheen, his tail came out of the deep swoop of his back in a cascading arc of iridescent green feathers, his spurred comb swept back from his little head like caught lightning, and his wattles lay against the broad puff of his chest like the plump folds of an imperial cloak.

"He's a big shot, all right," Grace acknowledged. "And doesn't he know it." It was true. He was the King. Wherever he stood was the royal precinct; there was always plenty of elbow room around him, and when he decided to go somewhere, he went, slow, straight, stately, and whoever was in his way got out of it—fast.

It was Grace who pointed out to me that there was another rooster in the flock, a young one she dubbed Oscar, because that was what he looked like, she said. Oscar. He was buff-colored—I think he was a Minorca—a gangling fellow with a scrawny neck and not much of anything in the way of comb or wattles yet. All the same he had a dream of himself in the world and we began to be aware

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of the occasions when this internal vision overwhelmed him. He'd stand up very straight, with his neck feathers ruffed, glaring as if he was a very tough guy, but actually he looked only sad and skinny and long-legged up against Augustus's magnificent build. He himself knew he didn't have a Chinaman's chance. He'd try so hard to keep his neck feathers ruffed up fiercely, but despite himself they'd begin to wilt, he'd grow momentarily more crestfallen and finally he'd give it up altogether and try to walk off with a semblance of dignity. Augustus wasn't very gracious about it. Usually he'd step in just as Oscar was turning around and give him a nip on the rump, and then Oscar would let out a squawk and go phlumping across the yard like any old hen in the roost. Sometimes Augustus didn't wait for Oscar to get tough. He'd let fly a few fast ones at him in case Oscar had any doubts about who was boss.

I never dreamed that these encounters would ever get beyond the light-comedy stage. But along about the middle of August I became aware that Oscar and Augustus were engaged in a real battle. You had to watch for a while before you realized what was going on. For stretches of time they appeared to be going about their business as usual. But just as your attention was beginning to relax, they'd be squared off again, heads lowered, feathers ruffed, glaring at each other as if transfixed, each on the other's beady eye, circling stiffly about each other as on some slow-moving axis. Then in a sudden flash, they'd mix it—claws and beaks and feathers flying.

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What amazed me was that it was Oscar who seemed to be carrying the fight to Augustus. The skinny lunk had gone crazy. He was no match for Augustus. And while I knew that he probably deserved everything he was going to get, I hated to see him get it, and I worried about him. Things came to a head on a day when some of the folks had chartered a haywagon for an all-day picnic at Lackawack Point. Grace wasn't invited, of course, but she had a friend visiting her that weekend anyway and whenever that happened she'd kind of disappear with him and I would miss her and feel a little sulky, but a hayride was always an exciting event, for reasons I can't now properly assess.

What was involved was bumping along on flat boards covered with hay which got matted down after an hour or two so that every bump in the road jarred your spine; the younger married people usually got soupy and started to spoon and the older married people would feel obliged to make veiled jokes about what was going on with the younger people, or they would sing too loud or play horsy games; then there would be a stop somewhere to eat the dry sandwiches and drink the warm pop and then the long ride back, with everybody tired out, a little let down because of expectation unfulfilled, and for the first time a drowsy magic creeping upon the senses, the pale blur of the road slipping by, the faint roar and sudden stillnesses of the creek that ran alongside, the clopping of the horses making even spacings, like cutouts, in the unwinding scroll

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of insect sound, the trees now turned by night into an Enchanted Wood, the mushy couples somehow also redeemed by night into the company of all the beautiful lovers like Daphnis and Chloe and Perseus and Andromeda in my *Tales of Mythology*; and the voices of the older people joined in the familiar sorrows of Jewish song, muted now and hauntingly sad, reaching out to join the sadness of sky, of the dark trees, of a lonely, fluting bird, of all the inexpressible sadness of night. . . .

I guess I know, after all, what made those hayrides always an event. At any rate, for an afternoon and evening I forgot about Augustus and Oscar. They were back in my consciousness first thing in the morning; I gulped down my breakfast and hurried over to the barn. I was hoping that Oscar would have come to his senses by now and have quit the uneven contest, just have given up and gone away. I had some vague idea of getting him a handful of corn to make it up to him for his ruffled pride. But when I got to the barnyard I saw that the fight was still on. I knew suddenly that it wasn't going to be over until something terrible had happened, and the knowledge turned me sick, like one of Leonard Geiss's punches in the pit of the stomach.

They weren't making any pretense of attending to other business between rounds, they were just fighting, circling around with their heads lowered, clashing methodically, as if something beyond them were throwing them at each other. It wasn't comical any more, it was terrible. I ran to tell Roy.

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"They're going to kill each other," I said. I begged him to do something, to separate them. But he wouldn't. He said you couldn't stop roosters from fighting once they got started that way—the only way to stop them was to wring the neck of one of them and they weren't so good to eat, so why bother?

By now the men who'd come up over the weekend had become aware of what was going on; they'd taken sides and made bets on the outcome. From a three-to-one favorite, Augustus, by afternoon of that day, had gone down to even money. The stamina of that Minorca was beyond belief.

They fought all that day, the third of that remorseless combat. By late afternoon there was still no sign of their letting up and I was desperate. I couldn't find Grace. I went to my mother. She didn't seem to think the thing very important, and besides she didn't see what she could do about it. Finally I besought Mr. Foster to come to the rescue. He laughed and patted me on the head and told me not to worry. They'd get it settled between them, one way or the other. Two grown cocks, he said, were always one too many in a roost.

"But they're going to kill each other," I said, my voice wobbling on the edge of tears. "They're going to *kill* each other." I couldn't seem to get anybody to understand what was going on.

At dinner that evening I left the table on the pretext of having to go to the bathroom, and ran back to the barnyard. It was growing dark, but there they were, still at it,

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incredibly. I didn't have any trouble getting hold of Augustus. He was just about done for, though it wasn't until I picked him up that he gave way, and his body seemed to collapse in my hands. He was in terrible shape. His feathers were torn away in huge patches and what remained were matted with blood. One of his eyes was a bloody pulp and I don't think he was seeing much out of the other. Oscar, in appearance, wasn't much better off. You'd have thought that after three long days of it he'd have been glad enough to have someone throw in the sponge for his rival. But he actually flew at me when I picked Augustus up. That ragged, bleeding, half-dead rooster wasn't a living, vulnerable thing any more, he was a dedication to some implacable and eternal hatred. All those nips that Augustus had been taking out of Oscar's behind, all the times Oscar had gone squawking ignominiously across the yard, must have been adding up in him, and he wasn't going to be satisfied until everything that had once been erect and proud in Augustus was down in the dust before him.

At first I was going to take Augustus up to our room, but then I remembered the summerhouse across the road. It was built down the little slope that fell away to the creek below; two rear supports made a clearance of about two feet on the far side and formed a suitable shelter for my purpose. I settled Augustus there in a nest that I hastily contrived of some sawdust and cotton batting I'd found. I banked these around him and ran back to the dining room.

Afterward, I managed to get him a saucer of bread

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soaked in milk, from the kitchen, but he didn't touch it, just stood there, exactly as I had left him, huddled, dazed, shivering a little.

I didn't sleep much that night. For hours I lay awake thinking about Augustus, who had been so proud, brought now so low, deader than alive, but still unwilling to lie down. I decided then he must go back to the city with me, and I'd find a place for him where I could nurse him back to health and strength and where he could live out his declining years with honor and dignity. He couldn't go back to his kingdom. He was finished. Oscar was boss now. I knew my mother would make a terrific fuss, and I began to formulate a campaign of nagging to wear down her resistance.

I can see myself, the boy I was, lying there wakeful, looking out the window at the dark shape of the hill across the creek, listening to the fuzzy roar of the river and all the mysterious night noises—thinking about tragedy and death, about life and dignity and pride, thinking of these things without knowing the words, yet perhaps knowing more about them than I know now, because shame and expediency had not yet clouded their meaning for me. I could afford to make a fool of myself about such things. I could afford to lie there filled with heartbreak about an old rooster who had outlived his time, and who was not even good for stewing, as I'd been told.

After a while I must have slept. I don't know what I dreamed, or if I dreamed at all. I know that when I awoke

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some nameless dread was in me that seemed to belong to something I had dreamed.

It was just beginning to be morning. I lay for a moment looking out of the window at the hill and the water in the purplish gray dawn. Suddenly, I remembered. I jumped up and went to the window, half expecting what I saw and yet unable to believe, when I saw, that it was really happening, that it didn't belong to what I had been dreaming. Oscar had got out of the henyard, and somehow Augustus had wobbled out from under the summer porch. There they were in the middle of the road, as if drawn by some mysterious, eternal vengeance, and Oscar was methodically clawing and pecking to death what was left of Augustus. And still Augustus couldn't believe. He just stood there, tottering, huddled, as if he would like to be behind something, away from whatever it was that was tearing at the little life that remained in him.

I don't know how long I stood there in a kind of trance watching this nightmare, but when finally I saw Augustus topple over in the road, I really awoke. "Ma!" I yelled. "Ma!" with the same insupportable anguish that had been in me when I realized for the first time that I was lame. "Ma! He's killed him!"

Mother sat up with a jerk, but without waiting to explain I dashed downstairs. There was Augustus, lying in the road, an insentient heap of dusty, blood-caked feathers. Oscar was still standing by, as if dazed by his victory, not understanding that it was over and that he now at last was king

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of the roost. I couldn't even be angry with him for what he'd done to Augustus. The whole thing was too much for me. I knelt in the dust beside the dead bird and let go with all the grief that was in me.

Several sleepy-eyed people came running out on the porch, dragging bathrobes about them, staring, exclaiming, and some appeared at the windows. When they realized what had happened, I heard relieved sighs and laughter. My mother was standing in the window calling for me to come back in.

"Well, look at that," I heard someone say. "That skinny *momser* did him in after all. Can you beat it?"

"I told you."

"Well, *boychik*, pay me. In spades."

I knelt there crying, feeling as if I'd never be able to stop crying, never again as long as I lived. Then Grace came. She was kneeling in the road beside me. Her hair was mussed and frizzy, and she was wearing a flamboyant red wrapper. "Don't cry," she said. "Don't cry."

I was glad to have her there, but I couldn't stop crying. All I could do was to wail bitterly, "He's dead. He killed him."

"Honey," Grace said. "Come on. Don't take it so hard."

I turned to her, sobbing uncontrollably. She held me. "Come on, cheer up, honey," she said. "It's not so terrible to be dead."

I looked at her, so shocked that I forgot to cry.

"Sure," Grace said. "He's better off dead. He couldn't have gone back now, could he?"

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No, he couldn't have. Even I had realized that.

"But I was going to take him away," I said, sobbing again. "He would have got better."

Grace shook her head. "It wouldn't have done any good. This is where he belonged. Come on," she urged, shaking me gently, "snap out of it, honey. We're all going to get it some day, and Augustus got his in a fair fight, with his boots on. That's a good way to die, isn't it? Better than having your neck wrung?"

No way seemed a good way to die but I saw what Grace meant and it did make me feel just a little better.

"Look," Grace said. "Pull yourself together and we'll give him a grand funeral—the best."

Then my mother was standing beside us. "If you don't mind," she said, "if there's some arrangements to be made, I think a boy's mother is the proper one to make them." She took my hand and pulled me up, almost roughly. "And besides," she said, "in our religion we don't give funerals to chickens."

Grace got up slowly and stood a minute, not looking at my mother or me, dusting her hands off a number of times unnecessarily, as if she were thinking about something to say and couldn't make up her mind what; then she turned around and walked away without saying anything.

My mother took me upstairs, speaking now with irritable tenderness. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, a big boy, making such a commotion? Roosters are always

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fighting. It's their nature. If you're going to make a tragedy out of it you could spend your whole life crying."

She was right, and in a way I have. There are solid scientific terms for what she was trying to tell me, which I learned later—natural law, sexual selection, survival of the fittest—but they've never really helped me, deep down, to understand cruelty or the loss of a friend. Certainly that day her words meant nothing to me. What Grace had said had helped some and I was anxious to see her again and talk about a funeral for Augustus. It would have to be secret now, of course, maybe somewhere in the blueberry patch.

I gulped down my tears and washed my face and said yes, yes, yes, to whatever my mother was saying and ran out as soon as I could. I put Augustus in a box and was carrying him toward the Annex where Grace stayed when I saw the Stutz coming down the road. A man was driving and Grace was beside him, wearing one of her floppy hats tied down with a scarf knotted under her chin. She looked as pretty as any movie actress. I stood in the road, waving, expecting her to stop, but she said something to the man and he swerved the car around me and went on. I still thought he was going to stop and I ran after the car but Grace spoke to the man again, like she was angry, and the Stutz shot forward with a roar, through the gate, onto the highway in a racing turn and out of sight. That was the last I saw of her.

It must be that of all experience, pain bites deepest into

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the consciousness. What I write about now is thirty-five years gone; everything else back there comes in glimpses and fragments, to be pieced together like a mosaic, stared at—and remembered. But the pain is entire, as if preserved in a deep freeze, and fresh as ever as it thaws out in the memory, stronger and sharper than all the rest, obscuring all the rest.

I remember now that it was a long time before I got Augustus out of my mind. Sometimes at night I would cry aloud, thinking about him. It seemed to me then that I would never get over feeling as I did, would never again know anything as awful as that ruined life, that once proud creature humbled, huddled, shivering, dying under the summerhouse. For a time it filled the whole landscape of my thought, as its shadow does even now. But things fall into perspective ultimately, and then into oblivion. I forgot about Augustus and about Grace, how sick and lost I'd felt watching her in the red roadster disappear down the road, not understanding at all her sudden brutal departure, hating her for joining with everybody and everything else that made the world such a mean, miserable, hurtful place.

Now I have her back, to be in love with again, my willful lady with the ungrudging hips and compassionate heart and twenty-two-dollar shoes. Why is it that virtue goes always with a sour sound in the mind and it is the wayward and lost who make the lovely music we want to listen to once again, before the lights go out?

3

✿ As WITH all minorities, we vied among ourselves for social status and insisted on its prerogatives with an obstinate snobbery that would no doubt have seemed ludicrous to outsiders. Mrs. Perutz, for instance, who sold horse-radish in front of the fish store, secure in the superiority of her Sephardic strain over Mrs. Davidoff, the pretzel lady, who was Polish, could be only a figure of fun—except if one recognized the blood-soaked need for self-esteem that underlay it.

Anti-Semitism was all around us, in the air; the awareness that outside the few square miles of our suburban ghetto we were kikes and sheenies never left us. But aside from its psychic effect, we didn't really suffer from discrimination for the reason that it required Gentiles to do the discriminating and many of us lived for years without even seeing one. The snide attitude of friends and relatives

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who lived in Manhattan and groaned about the inconveniences of visiting us in the wilds of Brooklyn, disturbed us more; it gave us the feeling of country cousins and we resented it.

The royal road to social prominence among us was, of course, lineage. Being a Caen, a descendant of the ancient priestly caste, automatically put you in the social register. Sephardic Jews, whose forebears had enjoyed special persecutions at the hands of the Inquisition, were the acknowledged elite. A cut below them were German Jews; their arrogant claim to superiority had to be grudgingly acknowledged by the rest of us. Germany hadn't yet become a stench in the world's nostrils and we couldn't deny the glitter of names like Rothschild and Marx and Mendelssohn and Heine. Even with ordinary merchants like Mr. Rosenblum and Mr. Mandelbaum—when you understood what their names signified, it seemed evident that destiny had intended to set these people apart. You couldn't expect Mr. Roseflower and Mr. Almond Tree and Mr. Flowergarden and Mr. Joyous Man to walk the same paths as Mr. Compinsky and Mr. Levy.

So Sephardic Jews looked down their noses at German Jews and German Jews looked down on Russian Jews and Russian Jews looked down on the Jews from Eastern Europe and they would probably have looked down on the Yemenites if there had been any around. Lacking these and having no one else to look down on, they looked down on the *goyim*, which closed the circle.

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Distinction of scholarship and artistic achievement rated high among us. A father who was a rabbi or a doctor, or a son who was a "professional man," earned his family a solid place in the social hierarchy. Lacking any of these advantages, one still had a chance with money. A rich Jew, unless he had made his pile in junk, rags, or the rackets, was acceptable at almost any social level—although I remember one German family, the Korngolds, who rent their clothing and mourned in the traditional manner for the dead, over a daughter who had crossed over and eloped with the son of a wealthy Litvak.

Our own family, to the chagrin of my Aunt Rose who had a fierce tribal loyalty, never made it socially. This despite my aunt's insistence that in the old country ours had been a distinguished strain. The family tree boasted rabbis, physicians, learned men of all sorts, together with the lesser varieties of cantors and *shamuses*. There had been a famous actress in the seventeenth century, a near-famous sculptor in the eighteenth, several carvers in wood and ivory in the nineteenth, as well as the usual quota in cloth. Here in America, however, the strain seemed to have gone completely to pot with as unaspiring a collection of horse players and pool players and pinochle players as you could dig out of a garment center loft on a Saturday afternoon. My aunt felt this very keenly and with a mixture of hope and challenge she looked to my father to redress the family prestige.

He had conferred the mark of Caen by marrying my

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mother and this would have been a promising start out of the social anonymity my aunt resented so bitterly except that he was also an agnostic and a radical who took delight in pointing out that the priests from whom he was supposed to be descended were a gang of thieves and bigots who would be a disgrace to any family. Affluence remained the only chance and once or twice it seemed tantalizingly within reach. But the mirage faded.

I don't know how it is today but at that time any family whose fortunes were entwined with the dress business was living in a paper house erected on quicksand at the side of a volcano. My Uncle Phil, whose fortunes were entwined with race horses, also lived conditionally; the ten-room house which he planned in Great Neck, with a ticker in the parlor, was always being dashed from his grasp by a succession of mishaps, a bad start, a pulled tendon, a muddy track, a crooked jockey. The misfortunes which dogged my father's business had a more somber political or even international flavor. It was a boll weevil in South Carolina or a mulberry blight in Japan or a strike in Paterson, New Jersey, that started the lava flowing down Seventh Avenue. But the effect was the same; our domestic hash was settled by chance as capricious and ungovernable as the imponderables of the race track.

The magic word for us was season, and it had no relation to the equinox. Good, bad and slack were the seasons we lived by and their weather was made up in the ateliers of Paris, in the shops on the Boul Mich and in midnight

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conferences at union headquarters. Good season might be blizzard or deluge outside; within it was a warm sunny time of increased allowances, new drapes, plans for vacation at Mountain View House, possibly even a new Hupmobile at the curb. Slack season was a gray time between promise and abundance, with everything in abeyance, the new bicycle, the new suit, the new set of *The Book of Knowledge*, the new piano. Bad season meant firing the maid and "cutting down." Two bad seasons meant a second mortgage on the house and the threat of foreclosure.

There was one season in which the will-o'-the-wisp of wealth and its attendant social glamour danced before our eyes.

A few years after the war—the first World War—an economic ricochet of some sort sent the price of wool jersey soaring. It may have been something Woodrow Wilson said to Clemenceau, or failed to say; it may have been a nance-ish whim in a Paris salon; or it may have been that boll weevil again. In any case, my father had made a lucky commitment for a number of bolts of the stuff and overnight his contracts were worth millions. (In our neighborhood a million was roughly ten thousand dollars.) I was twelve and until I was thirteen a golden shimmer hung over my horizon. I gave up scavenging cigarette butts and smoked the real thing, Turkish Trophies, in a handsome box, ten for thirty cents. I studied the drawings of Max Beerbohm and made plans to lead a sartorially splendid life, possibly in Mayfair, writing verses for the *Yellow*

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Book, playing the piano only when the mood seized me and possibly finishing with an unforgettable flourish, like Petronius, by cutting my wrists in a golden bathtub and stopping my veins only when the conversation of my friends grew interesting.

Next season the market in wool jersey collapsed and I went to work after school for a Greek florist on De Kalb Avenue, twenty-five cents an hour and tips, while my father talked glumly about moving the family to Chicago where he had an offer to go into the skirt business. Grandpa and Grandma Gottlieb had settled there and it was an inducement that we could live with them and share expenses until he got established again.

Wealth and genealogy apart, there was yet another possibility of social distinction which I've not mentioned. That was having a genius in the family. From the point of view of prestige it ranked having a full-time serving-girl, tile bathrooms, parquet floors, or even a six-cylinder touring car. It was, in a way, even better than having a son who was a doctor or a lawyer. A genius doesn't need a diploma or a practice. You don't have to wait thirty years to *kleib* a little *nachess* which means, approximately, to gather the fruits of pride. A genius can be ten years old, or five, or as my Aunt Rose once set out to prove, three. In fact the younger the better. Of course, having a genius and maintaining him as a social asset are two different things; the upkeep on the standard model, even in our day, was considerable. Aside from the weekly bill for music lessons

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there was the cost of an instrument of quality. A boy for whom a secondhand pianola or a fiddle made in Camden, New Jersey, was good enough was obviously no genius. Since outright purchase of a Kranich and Bach piano or an eighteenth-century Italian violin was beyond the financial reach of most families, they had to pay through the nose, on the installment plan, for their budding Paderewskis and Mischa Elmans—sometimes long after the hopefuls had gone into vocational schools, or accounting or jazz combos.

There were less expensive kinds of genius one could have in the house, of course. I don't speak of elocution or dancing, because these were the province of girls who in our society could never do more than amuse or entertain, even if destined to be future Pavlovas or Bernhardtts. But a boy with a passion for studying the dictionary, or one who sat in his room at night with crayon and sketch pad, or with calipers and T square over a drawing board, or who walked in the streets with his nose always in a book, could conceivably be a youthful Shelley or Rembrandt or Einstein. The difficulty was to prove it. He could also be just a dope who was ruining his eyes and would need glasses by the time he was thirteen. On the other hand, there were few critics among us who would dare dispute the merits of a rousing performance of "The Three-Alarm Fire" on the piano, or "Meditation from Thaïs" on the violin.

I don't know what it was about me that fanned the stubborn dynastic flame in my Aunt Rose's bosom. But failing

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manorial splendor and lineal cachet, she was determined to have a genius in the family and I was it. For the first few years of my life I knew no rest. She brought me a variety of musical instruments: drums, fifes, harmonicas, a toy saxophone, a toy piano. When I was two she engaged a piano teacher for me, a Mr. Rosenblum who breathed heavily through bad teeth while displaying his own shattering virtuosity with "The Three-Alarm Fire." My mother didn't approve. She was concerned that my capacities were being overtaxed and I would become nervous. "So let him be a little nervous," my Aunt Rose said. "Mozart was nervous too."

For a time, apparently, I made sensational progress on the piano. I learned how to play a piece called "The Chase of the Butterflies." But at a recital Aunt Rose arranged for me, at the age of three, I came down with a case of stage fright, wet my rompers and broke down completely. All the butterflies got away. The recital was a fiasco. I didn't go near the piano again until I was eleven.

Aunt Rose took another tack with me. I.Q. tests had come into vogue at the time, and learning that the psychologists regarded vocabulary as one of the most significant indices of intelligence, she insisted on having me tested. She was certain, from the way I'd been shooting my mouth off since birth, that I must come off with a genius classification. Again my mother protested. If it was true, she was willing for the great news to grow on the family gradually and be absorbed slowly. My Aunt Rose ranted. What

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was the matter with this family? A child couldn't grow like a weed. Some thought had to be taken for his capabilities, some provision made for his guidance. If he was a genius, something should be done about it.

Under protest, she dragged me off to the Children's Clinic on Henry Street, where I went through a series of bewildering rituals that left me gnawing my knuckles in confusion, contempt and finally rage. It was again a fiasco. Afterward Aunt Rose insisted my score had been over two hundred. Super-genius. When challenged by suspicious neighbors to produce the figures, she said loftily that there were no figures. I'd broken the computer. I learned later that the actual score had been sixty-eight, which placed me squarely between a cretin and a moron.

My Aunt Rose wouldn't give up. The incident only stiffened her determination that I was going to amount to something. Not eventually, but now, by the time I was four. She badgered me with nursery rhymes, picture books, books to improve my comprehension and my vocabulary, she brought me psychologically tested and approved games to improve my associative processes and my co-ordination. My reactions became increasingly antisocial. I tore up the books and broke the games. I grew morose and didn't talk at all for three months. When I resumed I was again voluble but in a language comprehensible only to myself. I played with matches and spat a great deal. The only game I liked was cards, which delighted my Uncle Phil who soon had me riffing the pasteboards like a professional. My main dis-

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inction in the ensuing years was that I could hold my own at rummy and continued to wet the bed until I was five. When I was six, Aunt Rose finally acknowledged defeat. At six even the Chinese give up with their children. *Que sera, sera*. The mold was set, I was a surly little oaf indistinguishable from other little oafs on the block, engulfed in a passion for marbles and the pictures that came in packages of Sweet Caporal cigarettes.

About then my Uncle Ben came back from a hitch in the Army, and until he joined up again about a year later there was a period in which his quiet voice and deft pencil cleared away the angry clutter that Aunt Rose's mischief had left in my mind. He released me from the perilous conviction that learning is either a deadly bore or a source of inevitable humiliation. The games he played with me and the stories he told me and the drawings he made for me were never designed to improve, only to amuse and delight me. He gave me back the sense of enchantment. I can't say how he managed it. God knows he was not a gay fellow himself. I know now that he was a sadly troubled young man. But he had the capacity somehow to make the world seem gay and exciting, full of endless riches—and safe and predictable at the same time, and snug as a wool blanket. Maybe it was just that he was good and my child's heart knew him for what he was and adored him.

I repaid him, in time, for the wealth of love he gave me. In what miserable coin I repaid him. That's another chapter I must face in this memoir—and will. But not just yet.

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When my brother Leon was born, my Aunt Rose had given me up and the family too; she was sunk in disillusion. She eyed the new arrival with hostility. "Why has he got such a big head?" she wanted to know.

My mother bridled defensively. "The doctor says it's shaped just like Sir Walter Scott's."

"Yeah," my aunt observed tartly, "in this family anything can happen."

She observed Leon's progress through a monotonous succession of diapers with a coldly suspicious eye. "He looks," she said, "all washed out before he's even begun."

There was justice in what she said. As an infant, Leon had a sallow discouraged look about him, as if he knew he was Jewish and doomed to no social distinction whatever. But at nine months he perked up. By the time he was a year old he had a vocabulary of thirty words. Aunt Rose began to weaken. Leon was turning into a beautiful baby, with blue eyes, a chubby face and Buster Brown hair. He was talking in sentences before he was two. And when one day Aunt Rose came over to take him to the Park and he stepped back and said distinctly—and disdainfully—"Not in that *farshbloompetar fartach*" (meaning sloppy housedress, in Yiddish), Aunt Rose went to pieces completely. Here *was* authentic genius at last. Here was the true family strain asserting itself once more after a dismal lapse of years. Once and for all she was going to make it stick.

She went to work on Leon in earnest. Happily for her

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designs, Leon was a tractable child, with a fine memory and superb visual association. By the time he was three, he knew by heart every jot and tittle of the nursery jingles and tales she had accumulated and painstakingly taught him. What was more, he could identify them on the page by some picture or mark she had made, so that all she had to do was to indicate the page, point to the head of a verse, say "Read this one," and Leon was off like an iceboat in a tail wind.

On his third birthday, as she had done with me so disastrously, Aunt Rose came through with her carefully planned *mise en scène*. She gathered together all the ladies from the block on the pretext of a party for them and their children, and in the midst of the ensuing bedlam she exploded her bombshell. Mrs. Plotnick, the druggist lady, whom everybody despised, had just finished recounting how yesterday she was standing on the corner with her Joey when Mr. Hovick, our iceman, went by with his horse Solly, so what do you think? Joey had turned around in his buggy to follow Solly's progress for a while and then had turned back to look at his mother and said, just as plain, "Horsy." At this point Mrs. Farber, who was feuding at the moment with Mrs. Plotnick, was heard to remark, *sotto voce*, that it was not so wonderful for a two-year-old child to notice such a resemblance. And at this precise psychological juncture my Aunt Rose said, "Horsy shmorsy, my nephew can read. Anything."

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A pall fell over the assemblage—the adult contingent, that is. Something may have fallen over in our end too, where the older children were playing—about everything in the house fell that afternoon, but we didn't notice anything. All the ladies, however, were stunned. They seemed to regard the announcement somehow as a frame-up, a frontal attack on themselves and their progeny. . . . *Read?* a chorus of worried jeers arose now. A child of three? *Read?* It was ridiculous. Idiotic. Who ever heard of such nonsense. Ach . . .

"Yeah?" said my Aunt Rose. She spread Leon on the floor, belly down, like a small coonskin, put her knee in his back and a book under his nose, and said, "Read."

He read—on and on through the afternoon, as my Aunt Rose picked up one after another of the nursery books as if at random. I think he enjoyed it more than she did. I was aware that there was something decidedly unkosher about the proceedings and I've always enjoyed a good, rousing deception. For a time the audience sat spellbound, stupefied. Then they started to crowd around, exclaiming, gesticulating, denying the evidence of their own eyes. . . . Finally Mrs. Plotnick hit on the bright idea of pointing to a specific word on the page. "What's this?" she said. For a split second it looked bad. Then my Aunt Rose came through with a really brilliant stroke. "You're only confusing him," she said, pushing them all back. "You can't expect a child of three, even a genius, to read *letters*. Even

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Sir Philip Sydney didn't read letters, when he was four already. That's not how they teach reading now, altogether. He reads *by context*."

It was a masterly stroke. It was as if she had said, "He reads by the divine right of kings" or "by special arrangement with the Baal Shem." Fake, shmake, if a child read *by context* you might just as well give in and be done with it. The doubting throng fell back, muttering among themselves. Mrs. Plotnick, who'd been leading the attack, seeming to resent the whole thing as a personal affront directed against her Joey, gave up too. She sank into a chair.

"The child's a fiend," she said.

My mother was on her feet in an instant. What, she wanted to know, exactly, did Mrs. Plotnick mean by that remark? For a minute it seemed as if Mrs. Plotnick was going to hold her ground, but then she observed my Aunt Rose in a flanking maneuver around the dining room table and she backed down. What she'd meant to say, she said, was that the child was a genius.

So there it was. Leon held the office, undisputed, for about a year, when one day Mrs. Plotnick, who must have been tailing him all that time hoping for just such an opportunity, finally cornered Leon and me on Pitkin Avenue, where we'd gone on a shopping tour with my Aunt Rose. The latter had stopped for a moment at Gross's Knitting Emporium, and I had improved the shining hour by moving with Leon down to the United Cigar Store

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on the corner to nag the customers as they came out. "Gimme the picture, mister? Please, mister . . . ?"

Mrs. Plotnick came along trundling her Joey. That was the most carriage-ridden kid I think I've ever seen; he was always sitting in one with his face hanging over the side, looking vaguely like a junket. Mrs. Plotnick's eye lit up when she saw us. She looked hastily to the right and to the left, and then came over to me and Leon.

"Hello, dollings," she said.

I pulled Leon swiftly back out of reach of a possible caress which I knew from previous experience would leave a black-and-blue mark on his cheek for a week. "I have something for you, dollings," Mrs. Plotnick went on, with all the conviction of the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*.

I watched warily while she opened her bag, expecting anything from a cannon cracker to a squirt gun. But she took out merely an old envelope, a stub of a pencil—regarding us meanwhile with the disarming cordiality of an ogress. Then, amazingly, she came up with a couple of Tootsie Rolls which she held out, one to me and one to Leon.

Her Joey let out a scream at this point as if he'd been seized by a *dybbuk*. "Shah," Mrs. Plotnick said, and gave the carriage such a yank that it left Joey sitting dazed and silent and about half a foot away from his imminent convulsion. Leon had put out his hand trustingly but I held him back, still wary for the poison concealed in the gift.

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"Go ahead, dollings," Mrs. Plotnick said. She stuck one of the Tootsie Rolls into my hand, unwrapped the other and handed it to Leon. She waited for him to take a bite, then glancing quickly from right to left, seized the stub of the pencil and printed hastily on the envelope the letters I—S—E—E—T—H—E—C—A—T.

"What does it say, dolling?" she said, with a sugary smile, holding the envelope up in front of Leon. She was no fool, that woman. Leon looked at the envelope for a moment, then at me. I smelled a rat but I also smelled the weakening perfume of chocolate caramel and it incapacitated me for the moment.

"Come on, dolling," Mrs. Plotnick urged. "What does it say?"

Leon looked at the legend on the envelope, waiting for the gears to mesh. Then sweetly, obligingly, he began. "It says," he said, "The Story of Puss-in-Boots. Once upon a time—"

I felt a tug at my arm. It was such a tug as Thor might have given the Midgard serpent at Utgard. I turned to see Aunt Rose glaring at the Tootsie Roll in my hand. "You," she said. "Anything for a piece of candy." Then she turned on Leon. "Idiot," she said. She pronounced it id-yot, accent on the second syllable. *Sic transit gloria mundi*. Just a minute before, Leon had been a genius in the full possession of his marvelous powers. Aunt Rose had obviously emerged from Gross's Knitting Emporium in time to wit-

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ness the loss of her empire without being able to avert the catastrophe.

Disgustedly she pushed my arm back into its socket with a shove that disengaged my garters from my stockings and sent them clanking up around my middle like a pair of flung spurs. "Didn't I tell you you should never talk to that"—she glared at Mrs. Plotnick, who was executing an obscene hornpipe around Joey's carriage—"that *snoople*?"

She meant snooper, I suppose, but she was upset.

Mrs. Plotnick widened her mouth in glee. "Context, hah?" she jeered. "*Context*."

I have always had an imperfect visual concept of what goes on when a person girds his loins. But if that wasn't what my aunt did when she took a kind of half-step backward, gave her girdle a diagonal hitch—from the rear—and opened her mouth, then I don't know how else to describe it. And I don't know to what fires Mrs. Plotnick's ancestors would have been consigned in the next few minutes if Joey hadn't chosen that precise moment to fall out of his carriage.

But Mrs. Plotnick had attained her year-old objective of toppling our false pretender to the throne. Henceforth Leon was, as the saying goes, *aus capelusch macher* and she could face her own son again without getting a light case of cramps. And my poor Aunt Rose was again without a genius in the house.

The following year she began raising her own geniuses. As for Leon, he managed the fall from Olympus without

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a scratch. Before long he was coming home from school with his report card naïvely exposed so I could snatch it from him and call out raucously, “Hey, Ma, the dope’s got all D’s again.” To which my sensible mother would reply, “Nu, so he won’t be President.” And to Leon, “Go, darling, go in the kitchen and have a glass of milk with a *kuchen*.”

4

✿ It's too much to say that geniuses were a dime a dozen in our neighborhood but there were enough to go round. Heroes, on the other hand, were scarce. I can think of only one, actually, during all the time I was growing up. There may have been others among us but the thing about heroism is that its quality, unlike that of mercy, is strained. An eagle is an eagle, at rest or in flight. A hero is only a hero when he is rescuing somebody, or slaying a dragon, or storming a bastion. These props were harder to come by in our Brooklyn streets than violins or pianos. Which accounts in part for the fact that our geniuses outnumbered our heroes by a hundred to one.

Another reason was geography. The great breeding ground for heroes, of course, is war, and one of the prime causes of war, *lebensraum*, wasn't a problem for us as in the tenement districts. Quite the reverse; if any of us wanted

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trouble we had to go looking for it and were more than likely to walk off our aggressions or become otherwise diverted in an empty lot. Our Benny Leonards and Battling Levinskys came out of congested areas; the gang rivalries in which youthful Maccabees distinguished themselves were confined to localities like Greenpoint and Williamsburg—they could hardly be fomented with an antagonist who was invisible. Any Micks or Wops who took it into their heads to invade our territory would have been defeated by distance and attrition before any clash of arms could occur. It's hard to maintain the martial spirit if you have to travel to the enemy camp by streetcar.

The advent of the BMT and the surge of population it brought improved the situation. Ashcan covers began to rattle and rocks to fly. Eventually, I understand, Murder, Inc. established one of its best chapters in our old neighborhood. But in my day, bums didn't qualify as heroes. Bloody noses were less common than catarrh and more arguments were settled with biting words than with fists.

If it weren't for the Steinberg fire we'd probably never have got around to recognizing that Moey Finkelstein had in him the stuff of which Lochinvars are made. We couldn't be blamed for our lack of prescience. We took our books and movies pretty literally in those days. Jimmy Cagney and John Garfield and Mike Hammer and their projections of the hoodlum hero were in the future. We were still in the era of Hiawatha and Dan'l Boone and D'Artagnan and King Arthur. Moey could hardly qualify. Visualizing him

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astride a prancing charger or shooting from the hip would have involved visualizing him the next minute flat on his backside, or hopping around with a couple of toes shot off, yelling for his "Ma" in that queer, stricken bellow that sounded like a banshee loose in the Eden Musée.

In those days, our section of Brooklyn was virtually a frontier settlement. When the sun shone you could see the maculate gleam of Jamaica Bay off in the distance; in between were uninhabited flatlands and empty lots filled with all sorts of unimaginable rubbish. We called it treasure. The subway had not yet flung out its sooty arm to gather in our nickels; we walked half a mile to school every morning across open country and marsh. Pitkin Avenue, with its public markets, its malteds, and its Idlehour Movie Palace, was fifteen minutes dogtrot to the north.

Above all, its Idlehour Movie Palace. Saturday mornings always found us running not walking toward the nearest entrance, with an apple apiece and the price of admission clutched fast, against any mischance, in palms always a little sweaty with the intensity of our aliveness. Dry-throated, we would turn over our dimes and fling ourselves into the glimmering dark. It didn't matter where we came in during the feature—you never had to tell us who the tall, clean-limbed gentleman with the clear gray eyes and the deadly aim was. He was from another world but we knew him well. We'd met him many times before—here in the Idlehour—on the plains of Ilium, on the shores of the Susquehanna, in Camelot and Thrace and Cornwall. Some-

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times he was dressed in glittering mail, sometimes in a plain buckler and shield, or a coonskin cap, or a hat with eagle feathers. But whatever his garb we recognized him at once. He was the guy who made magic in a dusty world. He was the dream we'd not yet sold for thirty pieces of silver.

We never took Moey along on any of our excursions. In the first place it would have taken a week to get anywhere with him along, the way he walked. Then, we never thought of him as one of us. He was just another game to us, like One O'Cat, Stingo, Run Sheep Run. Kids, like their elders, have a way of ganging up on any of their fellows whom they sense as more vulnerable than the rest. Moey's qualifications as a butt were pretty obvious. You didn't even have to go out of your way to confuse him, he carried his own private daze around with him wherever he went. But he had another weakness, we discovered, a little symphony of a weakness, for our purposes. He was afraid—terribly, mortally afraid—of everything that crawled or wriggled or crept. Caterpillars, bugs, worms, even the catkins that fell from our poplars in the spring—any of these, dropped suddenly on the back of his hand, or on his hair, or down his back, would produce a fascinating paroxysm of terror.

He wasn't always available for our sport. He was afraid of us and stayed in the house most of the time, when we weren't in school. Or else if he came out it was usually in the company of his mother or one of his sisters. He seemed most attached to the youngest, Amy, a formidable little

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brat of six who didn't seem to know the meaning of *fear* and could use her legs and teeth to excellent advantage. We children always thought there was something a little queer about that whole family. They persisted in acting as if there was nothing in the world the matter with Moey. Mrs. Finkelstein was always taking us aside and telling us what a fine boy he was, how gentlemanly and considerate, what a help he was around the house, how they all loved him very much and maybe he was a little slow getting onto things but he had so many other fine qualities, why couldn't we just play nicely with him instead of teasing all the time?

We never paid any attention to her. It wasn't that we went out of our way to make Moey miserable. He was there and we used him—one of the manifold devices provided by an infinitely fertile Nature to keep us amused and happy on this earth. We didn't have time to consider his end of it. We were too busy being alive ourselves in those days—innocently and unsparingly alive.

We never bothered him when anyone else was around. But sometimes he ventured out by himself, urged out no doubt by his mother who was always hoping, I guess, that we'd accept him as one of us finally. And when we saw him then, if we weren't otherwise occupied, we'd signal to each other, and Leonard Geiss—who'd discovered the most effective medium of all for Moey's discomfiture, a length of rotted garden hose—would hustle over and get it out from under his porch where he kept it, and then we'd fall in behind Moey, trailing him for a while like Indian scouts,

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darting from tree to ashcan to tree, until finally Leonard would leap out in front with a bloodcurdling yell, and dangle the hose before Moey's heavy-lidded gaze and then snake it across the sidewalk in front of him.

The reaction was always immediate and always the same. A sort of convulsion would seize Moey. He would fling himself in a hundred directions at once, like a rag doll shaken by a pup, and at the same time that strange empty bellow would come from him: "Ma . . . Ma . . . Ma . . ." It was of the essence of comedy—that delirium of fright, those maddened, flinging movements. And it was safe—so long as Amy wasn't around. That was the best part of it. We were perfectly safe, even when he turned on us sometimes in his desperation, in spitting, amorphous rage, and we would range about him, darting our fingers into his face like snakes' tongues, one foot back so we could leap swiftly and cleanly out of the way of his lumbering, disorganized lunges, in the sure precision of our own glorious young bodies.

One time Mrs. Sussman intervened. She called Leonard and me into her house for a talk. We went reluctantly, despite the promise of refreshment. A talk with adults usually meant only one thing, a lecture, and the cookies that went with it still left it a lousy bargain for us. But we were a little in awe of Mrs. Sussman. What the word *gentlewoman* connotes—when one uses it respectfully—was what we felt about her. Her speech was quiet and refined, like on the stage, very different from the strident cadences and dec-

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laments we had grown accustomed to regard as ordinary speech. It was the same with her manners and her dress. She seemed an alien among us. It wasn't that she played the aristocrat or acted snobbish or superior. But there was an impalpable wall of reserve that surrounded her, rare among Jews, and no doubt baffling to her neighbors. The "what-are-you-having-for-supper-tonight" relationships usual on our block would have been inconceivable with her.

She must have been strongly moved that day by a sense of mission that broke through her shyness. She tried to rouse in Leonard and me a feeling of pity and responsibility. The remembrance has an ironic tinge for me now, knowing what her own capacity for pity and responsibility was to cost her later. She talked about Moey and his family, how sad it was for Mrs. Finkelstein, being poor and all, and having this added burden of a boy who would never grow up to be a comfort and a help to her but must always be cared for and looked after like a small child, and how it would be a blessing and a reward for us in afterlife if we stopped teasing him and tried to help him instead.

We listened and munched our cookies, washing them down with gulps of milk, and wondered what Mrs. Sussman was driving at, fidgeting in our chairs and trying to estimate when we could reasonably make our escape. Finally Leonard did, blurting out some excuse about homework or an errand he had to do, sliding off his chair and streaking to the door, treacherously, without a look at me. I wanted to follow but I remained, feeling some leaden

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obligation to do so, remembering something I'd heard my parents say, in guarded whispers, about why the Sussmans would never have any children.

Mrs. Sussman flattered me, implying that her appeal had been directed more to me than to Leonard because she felt I was more intelligent and sensitive and would understand. I don't know how much an eight-year-old boy understands but it seems to me now that I did sense dimly why our treatment of Moey was important to her and why she was getting to me with it, so that I was beginning to feel shaky and choked up. I was very happy when Mr. Sussman arrived. Now the atmosphere would lighten. The hand that had gripped my throat would let go. Mr. Sussman was one of the few adults—like my Uncle Ben—whom I was always glad to see. You could be natural with him. He didn't make of everything an occasion for a pronouncement or a sermon or a lecture. But this day was different. He took up where his wife had left off. He said, with his fine rich voice that had a ring of laughter always at the back of it, that a smart boy like me ought to realize we were all in Moey's boat, more or less.

I looked at him closely to see if this was another of his odd, sardonic jokes whose real meaning often came to me only long after he'd said them and usually had some lesson wrapped up in them about not being opinionated or pompous or just dumb. But he was grave now, not jokey. He said I was a Jew and ought to know enough about the history of our people to understand what it meant to be

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taunted and persecuted and made miserable because an accident of birth had made one different than his tormentors. He said it was shameful for Jews, after all that had happened to them, to be cruel and thoughtless and hateful to one another.

And here memory braids the skeins and I'm thinking how he might that day have been talking with prescience about his own situation that was to be, a few years later. For myself, only a few months afterward, with my leg in a brace, I was to know something more about the impersonal cruelty of fate and the legacy of the wolf pack that turns on its limping brother, not to help but to bring him down. But even then Mr. Sussman made his case strong enough for me to be crying when I left the house. What had impressed me as much as anything was what he'd said about primitive tribes, people we called savages, who treated dummies like Moey with respect and even reverence, giving them special consideration because they felt that those afflicted ones were closer to God than the rest.

I was filled with high resolve. I would learn more about the bitter, bloody history of my people and about the nobility of savages. Henceforth I would think of Moey as my poor unfortunate Jewish brother. I would try, humanly, to make up to him for the cruel accident of his birth. I would lift him up instead of casting him down. I would be his champion. Let any Mick or Spick or Polack or Wop try to molest him—forgetting for the moment that it was not the Gentile oppressor who was Moey's problem but our-

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selves. And that the poor slobs I was shaking a mental fist at needed a champion themselves.

Next day I took the rubber hose away from Leonard. We had a fight over it and I lost. Nursing my bruised ribs (Leonard won almost all his fights by concentrating on the solar plexus while the rest of us were trying flashily to hit that mythical button on the jaw), I had a chance to reflect that being a champion wasn't all euphoria and high resolve. There was a deal of liniment involved too.

I put aside an hour after school, as I'd promised Mr. Sussman, to read to Moey. But that quickly lost its content of rewarding virtue and became a bore. Quizzing Moey on what he'd got out of a story was frustrating. He got nothing. I soon realized it was only the dim animal warmth of my company, the fact that I was letting him sit with me for an hour, that accounted for the grateful dog's look in his eye. And the price of that came too high. My friends, obviously, weren't giving me high marks for my social conscience. I was merely going down in their books as some kind of a nut or something. It came to me that if I kept on with my program of good works I had an excellent chance of ending up in Moey's class altogether and maybe getting the same sort of treatment.

I wanted to end the business but I couldn't bear to tell Moey not to come around any more. I couldn't face the sad bewildered look I knew would come into his eyes. So I just dropped him—behind my own back so to speak. I just wasn't there when he came to the house at the ap-

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pointed time, shined up by his mother as if he was going to a party. My mother gave him cookies and milk and remonstrated with me afterwards, halfheartedly. I think she'd had about enough of Moey herself by then. After a while it penetrated even Moey's confused brain that he wasn't wanted any more. As for myself, life being what it is, a tough struggle at best, it's valuable to find out by the time you're eight that you have no vocation for being a champion of the oppressed, or a big brother to the downtrodden. You can then set about the business of making something of yourself, with the emotional decks cleared and the intercom in your head switched off against the wailings and pleadings and cries for help.

As it turned out, Moey didn't need me. He solved his own problem. Improbable as it seems, he was the only real champion, the only real hero among us. And what we wouldn't vouchsafe him for his need, we finally gave him in homage.

I can't remember now what the occasion was for our having been allowed to stay up later than usual the night the Steinberg house caught on fire. Maybe it was Halloween, or some other holiday. Anyway, it seemed to me that I'd just fallen asleep when I woke to a prolonged screaming that turned my dark and quiet room into an antechamber of Hell. We found out later that it was Jenny Steinberg who'd been making all the racket. The fire had started in her bedroom. Jenny was about fifteen, sultry-looking and rebellious. I think she was trying to make up for a too-

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big nose by being a Jezebel in a small way. The story was that she'd fallen asleep with a lighted cigarette in her fingers. Her hand was pretty badly burned and the older folks—the Steinbergs included—seemed to take a morose satisfaction in the fact that Jenny was the only one who was injured by the fire. It was quite obvious whose side God was on in the matter of young girls smoking.

By the time I got to the scene everybody in the neighborhood was there. The Steinbergs were standing around in nightclothes and bathrobes, dazed and silent, all except Jenny who was still carrying on about her hand. Someone had gone for a doctor, the alarm had been turned in and we could hear the distant clanging of the fire engines approaching. It was pretty exciting. Greasy gray smoke was pouring out of the upper windows, with now and again a wink of flame lighting up a lot of half-dressed people milling around, some of the women crying, the rest handing out suggestions with one hand and herding their children into safety with the other, the men dragging the oddest assortment of things out of the Steinberg house. I remember my father, dressed only in pants and slippers, running out with an armful of portieres that he'd apparently ripped down from a doorway, waving and writhing about him like a green octopus.

The engines arrived in a couple of minutes, compressing our excitement into an almost unbearable tension. There were two of them—a veritable hook and ladder and one of those old-fashioned affairs that look something like a

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boiler on wheels. The flames were crackling inside the house now, showing red against the windows, throwing a pallid smear of light onto the street, the scared faces of the women, the sweating faces of the men; it caught on the black glistening oilskins of the helmeted figures moving about like creatures from some other world, with those queer-looking hooked axes, shoving the people back, uncoiling the hose. Mrs. Steinberg was sobbing somewhere in the crowd now, Mr. Steinberg was trying to soothe her distractedly, Jenny was sitting on the Finkelsteins' porch steps, whimpering. And we watched with our stomachs pulled in and the hair prickling on the backs of our necks. It was thrilling and distressing and a little eerie at the same time. Half of us, the upper half, liked it. The rest, the legs part, was more than half disposed to turn us around and hustle us back home into the snugness and safety of our beds.

We'd all been pushed back out of range on the other side of the street, the firemen were already smashing windows, calling to each other in hoarse portentous voices. The fire-plug was some distance down the block and they had to unroll quite a length of hose to reach it. It lay along the gutter, looped and snaky-looking. Leonard Plotkin had come up to join me a while before; we looked at each other and I know the same idea crossed our minds. We didn't laugh though. It looked enough like an unearthly great snake so that we were a little scared of it ourselves.

I don't know yet how Amy Finkelstein happened to be

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standing out in the street, off to one side of the crowd, without anyone noticing her. She was a nervy little kid, for a girl—just about as fearless as she was bratty, which is saying a good deal. Anyway she was there, standing in the gutter, when the firemen turned the water on. One of them saw her, yelled and reached out to grab her. But she pulled away and ran out toward the middle of the street and just then the water came leaping through the hose and a loop of it, straightening out, swung against her legs and knocked her down. It must have stunned her for a moment because she just lay there with one of her legs pinned under the hose. Mrs. Finkelstein let out a yell and at the same moment, almost before we had time to realize what was happening, we saw Moey tear himself away from his mother's side, rush out into the street with that flopping, every-which-way stride of his and throw himself down on the hose, thrashing and kicking at it and yelling at the same time, in that hoarse nightmare voice of his.

It was all over in a second, almost before it had begun. The firemen got to him and Amy, pulled them both to their feet and flung them back into the crowd. But we'd seen something we wouldn't soon forget. In a way it was funny, I suppose—seeing this great gawk of a kid sprawling across the hose, fighting it, bellowing like a stricken ox, and frothing at the mouth. But for once we didn't find it funny. Standing there in the presence of Disaster, bright and crackling and awesome, against the dark sky—ourselves scared and upset and taut—I think we understood at

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last, dimly, what horror we'd been making for Moey in the confused murk of his consciousness, what nameless hideousness that thing in the street had represented to him, what that pathetic and ludicrous and heroic effort of his must have cost him. It was a dragon he'd gone out to fight—it had got his sister and he, Moey Finkelstein, without benefit of armor, of fearlessness, of anything, had gone out alone to rescue her. . . .

I think maybe it got to us right then that it wasn't all there in the books we read and the movies we saw—that chivalry wasn't necessarily something with gray eyes and Nordic features that lived in another world far from ours, and we could only go look at it once in a while, for a dime's worth—when we had a dime. It came to us that you might be a Jew kid in a comical place called Brooklyn, the son of a furrier or a junk dealer or a ladies' tailor, you might even be a dopey Jew kid who slobbered at the mouth and wasn't all there—and there was something in you that could still rise to knighthood above the blind terror in your soul, above the slapstick comedy that circumstance had cast you for, above even the ignominy of a name like Finkelstein—and set you side by side with Sir Gawain and Sir Galahad and Sir Tristan.

Maybe we didn't get it just that way at the time. I know we never teased Moey again. The fun had gone out of it.

5

✿ **THOUGH** I could not shape its design or purpose in words, I begin to see that there is a pattern of a sort in these recollections—as if, equally, there had been some order in which they’d been put aside. My Aunt Minnie, who for many years had disappeared entirely from my memory, has been slow to reappear. Much of what I now remember of her, or seem to remember, I couldn’t have seen with my own eyes; it would be part of a legend of Family which is absorbed into one’s being, growing up, as the genes of unknown planters are earlier absorbed, leaning—however lightly—on the twig, coloring one’s not-yet-formed thoughts and attitudes in some degree, for good or ill—if only in rebellion, or shame, or disavowal.

At any rate, Aunt Minnie has been increasingly in my thoughts of late, emerging as if in developing fluid, dimly perceived at first, then clearer, and now on this day of

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promise, of impending spring, her image is before me, all two hundred and fifty pounds of her, as I last saw her, but printed like a double exposure over another image that has blown up out of the past, a picture in an ancient album of a slender girl in a guimpe, exuding an intense vitality and looking pridefully at the birdie. The object of her pride, standing beside her—caught in a characteristic pose of the period, one-fourth of a barbershop quartet, with a *Police Gazette* haircut—was her intended, a tall young Polish Jew named Morris Amster, later Morris Amster, D.D.S., but for us never anything but Uncle Maish, an approximate rendering of his Christian name in Hebrew.

I remember now that Uncle Maish was always treated by the family with a certain amount of snobbery. In view of the high status accorded by us to the Professional Man, as against the merchant or salaried worker, this was an anomaly and Uncle Maish could justifiably complain that he never got the respect from his in-laws that he felt entitled to. He lifted himself by the bootstraps—or rather Aunt Minnie lifted him—from a lowly job for wages into the practice of dentistry. It was an epic achievement, as I think back on it now, but our plaudits, such as they were, were reserved for Aunt Minnie. Uncle Maish, at first the object of slightly contemptuous joshing, enjoyed for his success only our slightly contemptuous amazement.

The title after his name was itself a standing joke. There was a reason for this which I'll come to presently, but in general, at the time, dentistry was not equated with medi-

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cine as a profession. It was regarded more in the light of a specialized trade, like plumbing or barbering. A key to the distinction made was that you went to a Doctor's Office to have your chest thumped, while your teeth were filled in a Dental Parlor—as they were later excavated in an Embalming Parlor, if they hadn't by then been knocked out in a Pool Parlor.

I'm doing it myself, you see. The dentist always seemed a legitimate source of innocent merriment, much as the psychoanalyst is today. No doubt fear of both is the root. But the bogeys that lurk at the foot of the analyst's couch are not in the same league with that monstrous metallic mantis that prayed in horrid silence beside Uncle Maish's chair and became a buzzing fiend of hell in his hand. How many voices of my past are lost, or jangled out of tune! But Uncle Maish comes through loud and clear, a stagy baritone, aware of its own operatic overtones, oddly shaded by Jewish inflections: "Don't make such a face, I'm not hurting you," with the hot agony of the drill contracting to the size of a mere baseball in my mouth. Uncle Maish was one of the first in the neighborhood to advertise Painless Dentistry, and Uncle Phil was always giving him a helpful hand with slogans. *Scream now, Pay later*, was one I recall.

When Aunt Minnie met him, Uncle Maish was a shipping clerk and apprentice cutter in Mr. Sussman's fur emporium on Pitkin Avenue. It was my mother who saw him first. She was shopping for a muff. In later years he got

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beefy and had a habit of filling in the pauses in his conversation by humming deep down in his throat, from *The Opera* (generic term, like *Classical*), and making with his head like Titta Ruffo. But what my mother saw at the time was a well-set-up, good-looking young man, Jewish, probably single and working. That would have been, I judge, the order of her impressions. No dealer in horseflesh ever had a sharper, more immediate eye for the essentials than a Jewish lady in our community with an unmarried sister or daughter.

The young man was distantly related to Mr. Sussman. He was not long over from the old country and though he was not Sephardic, or a Caen, or from Germany, he did come from the better side of the tracks in West Poland. This was established with other vital statistics, presumably while my mother was debating the merits of sealskin and beaver. It would be natural for her to express a concern about what a nice Jewish youth, without any family, did with his evenings. She no doubt thought it would be nice for him to meet some nice girl in the neighborhood, have a nice home-cooked meal sometimes, in nice surroundings.

Mr. Sussman got the message and sent Uncle Maish to deliver the karakul muff my mother finally bought. Aunt Minnie happened to be at the house when he arrived. They were introduced. The young man was invited to stay a minute, have a little something, the kettle was on the stove anyway and Mr. Sussman was a neighbor, not only a boss, he wouldn't mind.

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All this was standard procedure. Gentiles have things easier, their marriages being arranged in heaven, but with us everything had to be worked out on the ground, with tact and sometimes considerable virtuosity, by the interested parties. Much conferencing and conniving was involved, as well as the consumption, by the principals, of endless glasses of tea—with raspberry preserves, if things began to look really promising.

Uncle Maish, that day, sat down and had a fateful glass of tea. Thereafter he drank tea at Aunt Rose's, Aunt Frieda's and Aunt Lily's, then he started around the circuit again at our house. Eventually he proposed. It was that or drown, I guess.

He was judged a catch, I imagine, on the financial side, having a steady job at twelve dollars a week and the eye of a substantial man like Mr. Sussman benevolently cocked at his future. When the marriage contract was safely signed and the happy couple was off to Brighton Beach, on the bus, for a weekend honeymoon, and the family felt free to relax and express their real opinions, the consensus was that the groom had looked handsome enough under the wedding canopy but a fireball, intellectually, he was certainly not. However, everyone agreed that it was probably just as well he wasn't. He would provide the right ballast for Minnie, who was considered much too flighty and ambitious for her own good.

Shortly after the ceremony, Mr. Sussman, having helped to get Aunt Minnie married and therefore having a stake

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in her subsequent welfare (on the same theory, I suppose, that if you save someone's life you've got to make it up to him afterward), promoted a job for Uncle Maish in a wholesale fur factory as a junior cutter, full time. The salary was a step upward, to fourteen dollars a week, there would be extra pay for overtime and if the young man minded his P's and Q's, walked softly with the bosses and worked hard, his eventual status as a full-fledged cutter and a good provider for his family was assured.

There was a little family gathering at our house to celebrate the good news. Aunt Minnie came alone. Immediately the family sniffed trouble. (Jews have a tropism toward Disaster; telegrams, even on birthdays, are always opened with a quaking heart.) What was the matter? Already trouble between the lovebirds? There'd been a quarrel. There must have been a quarrel. There was no use in Minnie trying to act like a Boston blueblood and deny it.

"Wait a minute," Aunt Minnie said. "Let me speak."

"Never mind wait," Aunt Frieda said. "This is the way to start a miserable life. You got to patch things up right away."

There was about to follow a catalogue of nostrums for patching things up, from four women who knew a thing or two about arnica. Aunt Minnie stamped her foot. "Let me say a word already," she said. The others fell silent, calamitously. There was nothing to patch up, Aunt Minnie said. Everything was fine. More than fine. Her eyes shone, unmistakably, with the joys of connubial fulfillment.

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"Morris," she said, with delicious pride, "has got night school tonight."

Considering the high premium that our kind always placed on education, the reaction that this provoked—which was a pattern where Uncle Maish was concerned—was singular. "What do you mean he's got night school?" Uncle Phil asked. "When did he catch it?"

It appeared that Uncle Maish had been going for a month, five nights a week, to Cooper Union.

"Five nights a week," Aunt Lily echoed, thunderstruck. "And you let him?"

"Why shouldn't I let him," Aunt Minnie said, "if he wants to improve himself?"

"You got to be a little crazy, you know," Aunt Frieda said. "Two months married and you send your husband away every night to night school?"

"Sounds to me," my father said, "like they're not getting along. Plain." (Being only an honorary member of the family, by marriage, he was allowed only editorial remarks, delivered in the third person for safety.)

"Sounds to *me*," Aunt Minnie said, "that this family is only worried Morris is using up all his energy in night school. I'll guarantee you he's got enough left over to make me a very happy married woman."

This was pretty bold talk for the time, but my Aunt Minnie was a forthright little character in those days. (If all the words here don't come off an actual tape recorder in my brain I know them still to speak truly for the people,

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as they were.) For certain Aunt Minnie's shocker was met with a thump of silence by the sisters and a pursing of lips. But with Uncle Phil it was another matter.

"I'm relieved to hear you're getting it regular," he said, always a man to bring the poolroom and the race track into the parlor, as my mother said. "So why don't you relax? You're always prancing around the paddock. You're married now, your husband just got a promotion, he's doing fine, let him alone with the culture, for God's sake."

"What is he studying there, five nights a week?" asked Aunt Frieda, in the tone of a district attorney.

"English. Science," said Aunt Minnie, trying to make it sound matter-of-fact but failing. She dearly loved her sisters but she dearly loved to toss them a bombshell too. Their own husbands, right at this moment, were noisily bidding up a three-fifty pinochle hand in the dining room.

"Science," my father muttered incredulously: "That *Cooney Leml*?" This was a reference to a cartoon character of the period, one of a pair of Jewish Simple Simons whose doings—or undoings—were daily chronicled in one of the Jewish newspapers. If the remark was overheard, it went unchallenged. For once my father, who was considered something of an iconoclast, was on the side of the rest of the family. There was a new note of outrage in their reaction to this latest effrontery from Aunt Minnie.

I want to make something clear at this point. Obviously, if this journey into the past means anything, it is a quest for reality not illusion—my reality, which is the reality of

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those who are part of my blood and bone. I realize that the desire to see clearly and evaluate truthfully has led me into certain contradictions, which is the way life and people, even Jews, happen to be. But while I wish always to face the truth about them, even when it pains me, I do not wish to be sardonic or slanderous. If there is such a thing as a racial characteristic, which I doubt, the one trait shared by my people, as I knew them, was aspiration, on some level. With the orthodox the range was narrow, reaching into the ethics and metaphysics of the Talmud. Among the ladies it was something vaguely called "culture." Even the horse players and pinochle players, like Uncle Phil, read books and had opinions and wanted to be considered intelligent.

But there was a difference between being cultured or intelligent and being an intellectual. That implied a certain nihilism, a willingness to flirt with dangerous ideas like socialism, atheism and, on the theoretical level, free love. The legitimate area for intelligent study and discourse, among respectable people, was literature, history, politics up to a point, and music. Religion and the new psychology which intrigued some of the bolder spirits were already crowding the borderline of radicalism. But science, even in those primitive days before the advent of the block-long nuclear equations, just didn't enter the ordinary person's ken, or parlor. It was considered too abstruse, even by intellectuals like my father. It was a domain inhabited only by professors.

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And now this poor oaf of a Maish was giving himself airs, studying Science. It wasn't enough that pretty soon he'd probably be coming around garbling Shakespeare in his impressive baritone!

"What kind of Science?" Aunt Frieda said accusingly.

"General," said Aunt Minnie. "Just to improve himself."

"What is with you, Minnie?" Uncle Phil said. "Your husband's got to be a scientist to cut up a muskrat?"

"I want him to make something of himself," said Aunt Minnie. "Is that a crime?" And then she added, provocatively, "Maybe he won't always be a fur cutter."

"How do you like that?" Aunt Lily said. "He's been a fur cutter, full time, a whole day already—and already you got other plans for him."

"Minnie, I'm going to tell you something," Aunt Frieda said. "Plain out. For your own good. You are not going to make a silk suit out of a cow's ear. You got a nice steady man to make a living for you. Be satisfied. Don't always be reaching for the moon."

"You mean a person can't improve himself?" Aunt Minnie said.

"He's not a Leonardo da Vinci," Aunt Rose warned. "He's got enough to do to hold down his new job. It's no use trying to dance at two weddings with one behind."

No doubt, honest familial concern was being evinced here. In the jungle where furs were cut and dresses sewed and skirts pleated and pants manufactured in pairs, the competition for jobs was fierce, a man needed all his re-

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sources just to hold on, let alone advance himself a little. There was danger in pushing a man too hard, flying too high. Particularly a man like Uncle Maish, whose wings came unstuck at room temperature if the conversation soared a quarter of an inch above his head. He would sit back, while the talk about books or politics bounced all around him, boo-boo-booing a fragment from *Aida* or *Traviata*, with unconscious operatic tosses of the head and a vacant expression on his undeniably good-looking face. The picture of him at night school with his brows knitted over a problem in Science was conceivably genuinely alarming to the family. It would put an intolerable strain on the poor man's head. Anything could happen. He could run amok one day among the muskrat pelts.

But again, seeking truth—if there was legitimate worry about Minnie's reckless ambitions for her husband, there was perhaps something else as well. Everybody in our family loved everybody, of course, and woe to any outsider with a word of criticism. But for themselves the sisters reserved the right to mix a little disapproval into their concern for Minnie's welfare. They had always been a little irked, I imagine, by the airs she gave herself, her seemingly tacit assumption that life was going to dance a livelier tune around her than anyone else. Aunt Minnie wore frocks when everybody else in the family wore dresses. She had a Castle Clip before any of the others thought of cutting their hair. She talked about lectures on nutrition when the others talked recipes. Now she was married and acted as if

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the whole thing had been a big romance when everybody knew that it was with plenty of co-operation all around that she'd got herself a husband. So fine, the worst of all possible fates had been spared her, she was not going to be an old maid. But did she have to kid the goldfish about this *schlemiel* she'd married? Neither Aunt Frieda, nor Aunt Lily, nor Aunt Rose, nor for all I know my mother, was under any illusion that she herself had captured a Valentino or an Einstein. It must have annoyed them a little that Aunt Minnie behaved as if her Morris was a combination of both.

But Aunt Minnie was serenely impervious to their barbs, if barbs they were. She smiled her secret, superior smile; she knew what she knew. A few months later she made an announcement that really rattled the bead portieres. Morris was quitting his job to enroll full time in Dental College. A howl of incredulous, frantic concern went up from the family. What kind of fresh lunacy was this? Aunt Minnie was calm, maddeningly calm. This concerned nobody but herself and her husband. They'd talked it over and it was all decided.

"You mean *you* talked it over," Aunt Lily said. "You and your wild ideas."

"A twenty-nine-year-old schoolboy," said Aunt Frieda.

"It's never too late," Aunt Minnie said. "Morris is going to make something of himself. He's not going to waste his life at a cutting table in a fur factory."

"What is with you, Minnie?" Uncle Phil demanded.

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"You got a little dementia praecox or something? It's better he should waste his life in Dental School—with nothing coming in? When do you expect that genius of yours to finish? He'll be stepping on a long white beard to get his diploma. Where's he going to practice, maybe sixty years old? On whom?"

"He's going to Dental College," Aunt Minnie said. "And you can sit and make funny jokes and become a Ph.D. from horses. My Morris will be a dentist, and a good one."

"And how are you going to eat meanwhile?" Aunt Rose wanted to know.

"Don't worry, we'll eat," Aunt Minnie said stoutly.

"Yeah," said my father dolefully. "And I got an idea where."

"I don't care what you say," said Aunt Minnie. "That's how it's going to be."

And that's how it was. Uncle Maish quit his job and enrolled in Dental School. Aunt Minnie got a line of samples from my father and turned the front room of her flat into a retail dress shop. By picking up job lots and close-outs from manufacturers which my father and Mr. Sussman steered her onto, pricing the garments well below what the stores would ask, and making alterations free, she gradually developed a clientele. It meant a full day, shopping for merchandise, waiting on customers, staying up nights to do the alterations. But she made a living and bore four children besides and took care of them, cheerful and efficient and uncomplaining, all ninety-eight pounds of her.

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How she did it I'll never know. I've had two households of my own and I know what happens on the maid's day off.

What Uncle Maish thought about all this is not in the record. The family was so disgusted with him they could hardly bear to talk to him. My mother, who regarded him with somewhat more indulgence than the rest, said with a sigh that he wasn't really to blame. It was Minnie, with her insatiable ambition. Uncle Maish was only a *Praguer golem* (a legendary figure, mindless and biddable, who when told by the city fathers to bring water from a certain well to relieve a shortage, kept bringing it until he inundated the town). Aunt Minnie had said Dental School, so he was going to Dental School. If she'd said go to the well, he'd have gone to the well.

He carried water to Prague in this way for a number of years without anything conclusive happening. He took a number of examinations but none of them seemed, for him, to be a final exam. Not that he couldn't get his fist in a Polack's mouth and yank with the best of them; it was in other departments such as anatomy, anesthesia, clay modeling, etc., that he kept flunking regularly. What would have happened eventually, in view of my aunt's fierce tenacity of purpose, I'm sure I don't know, had not a kindly fate intervened. Its name was, if I remember right, Mahoney or maybe it was Mehaffey. He had connections at Tammany Hall and he was something special in the way of a tutor. His fee was something special too, seventy-five dollars, a considerable sum in those days. But

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straightaway on payment, my uncle's knowledge of the fine points of dentistry was wonderfully enhanced. Indeed so rapid was his progress that two days later he was in possession of his diploma and a license to practice. No one even bothered to look at the diploma to see what school he had graduated from; it wasn't considered important. He was a dentist, and that was enough. And at that point, presumably, my Aunt Minnie relaxed and sat down long enough to have a little cry for herself. She was often, in those days, sitting down to have "a little cry for herself," just as some people take a hot bath.

Odd as it may seem, Uncle Maish prospered in his profession. I suppose actually he was no worse a dentist than most of his contemporaries. In those days, when you went to a Dental Parlor you didn't expect a picnic. The word *Painless* in the sign didn't fool anybody. It was taken as a bit of lily gilding, like *Absolutely Final Clearance* in the stores. Or God's mercy. Nobody expected anything from it, really.

In any case, Uncle Maish built up a lucrative practice among the shopkeepers on Pitkin Avenue and their wives. Especially the wives. He'd always been considered handsome, in a dopey way, and now he had his suits made at Zivin's Hand Tailoring and went to the Tonsorial Parlor every two weeks.

I can see him, in his white coat, bending over Mrs. Pasternach, of Pasternach's Draperies and Curtains, saying "Open wide, please," probing, at the same time boo-boo-

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booing a soulful fragment from *The Pearl Fishers* or *La Juive*, which all the higher-class ladies of the period were swooning over, in the Caruso recordings on their gramophones. You don't need Freud to know that Uncle Maish must have been irresistible.

For whatever reason, the fact is he was very successful. At one time he was reported to be making over three hundred dollars a week, after all his professional expenses were paid. Aunt Minnie, I'm afraid, proved lacking in the grace of a real lady. She was frankly triumphant. I-told-you-so was a gleeful ingredient in all her exchanges with her sisters. It was even wrapped in her gifts. Perhaps, not unjustifiably, she felt that the family had been wonderfully restrained in sympathy and encouragement when it would have meant a great deal to her. Now she lorded it over them shamelessly, and loved it. She moved out of the old neighborhood to Eastern Parkway where the swells lived. She flaunted her clothes, her jewelry, her new furniture, her Louis XVI piano, at every opportunity.

The last straw was her acquisition of a colored "help," a pearl beyond price named Zelda. Zelda had been hewn to specifications in some Jewish Housewives' Heaven. She was large, she was efficient, she was tireless, she was jovial, she was honest, she combined all the best features of a *bonne*, a cook and an expressman. Her broom would have made short shrift of the Augean Stables in an afternoon and her laugh matched it, sweeping through the house like a fine, fresh, sixty-mile gale. Originally she had come to do

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part-time work but Aunt Minnie had fallen in love with her, as who wouldn't, and nothing would do but Zelda must come to live with her. Zelda had a husband and a ten-year-old daughter, but the husband was one of those will-o'-the-wisps seen mostly through a glass darkly, and sometimes, when the glass had been emptied enough times, not seen at all for weeks at a time. He was no problem for Zelda. And her ten-year-old daughter was no problem for Aunt Minnie. She had a six-room flat now and only four children of her own so there was room to burn. Zelda moved in with her child and took charge. She cleaned, washed, cooked, baked, took care of the children and found time besides to do Aunt Minnie's nails, give her facials and wave her hair. And Aunt Minnie was left with nothing to do but join the Ladies' Auxiliary and put on a little weight.

Her biggest single triumph came on the night my Aunt Frieda's Flo was married. Being late for a Jewish wedding is no mean accomplishment; you have to be a past master of the art, any ordinary conception of lateness will land you there hours before things have really got going. But Aunt Minnie made it, successfully, brilliantly late, arriving after the rabbi himself and holding up the ceremony. She was resplendent in a green billiard-cloth gown and she made a spectacular entrance with her four children and Zelda and Zelda's daughter. Aunt Frieda and the others were fuming. A wedding is the last place in the world for everybody to stop loving everybody, but this air of a dow-

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ager empress (by now Aunt Minnie had begun to assume the proportions of one) descending with her retinue, was just too much to be borne. There were some crisp words offered by my aunts in turn and returned in kind. By the time the ceremony began, enough tight-lipped rancor ringed the canopy to ferment the grapes on the dining room wallpaper.

Another crisis arose afterward when Aunt Frieda refused to make a place at the table for Zelda, claiming there was no room. This was sheer spite work. There was plenty of room, it only required a little good will to move the plates around a little closer together. But Aunt Frieda refused stubbornly to do this. A stormy compromise, which satisfied no one, was finally effected. Zelda and Zeldina sat in chairs behind and slightly to the left of Aunt Minnie who, during the course of the meal, handed back the pickled fish and roast chicken and *tsimmess*, and took back the empty plates, with a queenly manner, and over her left shoulder, of course, as etiquette demanded.

So Aunt Minnie had her season of reaping and fulfillment. But pride goeth before a fall and a habitation giddy and unsure hath he that buildeth on the vulgar heart. I mean Uncle Maish's, not my aunt's. She had made, in her sister's phrase, a silk suit out of a cow's ear, and if Aunt Frieda wanted her innings she got them in full measure.

The author of Aunt Minnie's downfall—and of Uncle Maish's as well—was a widow lady who appeared in his Dental Parlor recommended, as Disaster sometimes is, by

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a friend. He began by fixing her teeth and she ended by fixing his wagon. She was a voice teacher and she had a samovar at home where a circle of friends gathered nightly to talk of concerts they'd actually attended and operas they'd actually seen, instead of merely listening to them piecemeal in recorded arias. The lady was Russian, her name was Fanya or Tanya, and through her, Uncle Maish made the momentous discovery that he had a soul and was at heart not a dentist at all but an artist, and that his baritone voice was a God-given instrument to be used for larger purposes than throaty regurgitations of Caruso records or howling when the rubber at the Turkish Bath got too free with the besom.

He began training his voice, vocalizing at all hours, against the neighbors' protests, and in the pauses between patients, do, mi, sol, do, sol, mi, do, wielding a forceps or scraper like a baton, and letting go now and again in calf-like bellowings that rattled the dentures in their molds.

He began going regularly to concerts and The Opera, with his voice teacher always beside him to point out the fine points of phrasing and intonation. Obviously there was no place for Aunt Minnie in these sessions, their intention being professional rather than cultural or social. There was no point in her going alone either, in the hope of joining him afterward, because Madame Fanya, or Tanya, always took him home afterward to show him her musical notations and continue his education.

Aunt Minnie was without resources to meet this threat

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to her marriage. For years now all her aspirations had been centered in her husband. She'd been so busy improving him that she'd neglected her own improvement. In justice it must be said that eighteen hours a day at dressmaking hadn't left her much time for the finer things in life. But the truth is that now, with time on her hands, she'd fallen into a slothful habit of settling for Uncle Maish's success. It had been years since she'd even read a book.

She tried now to remedy matters, to shore up her slipping world. As a girl she had played the piano; she tried to pick it up again but her pudgy fingers soon defeated her. The worst of it was that Uncle Maish seemed only irritated by her attempts to move with him into this new dimension of his life. If she read an article in *Etude* magazine, to which he subscribed now, or memorized some phrase from a critic's review of some musical event, to spring on him hopefully at breakfast, he would shut her up impatiently. "What do you know about it, Minnie? Stick to your Ladies' Auxiliary."

All the same she was still proud of him, even though it left her now, bewilderingly, outside the parade instead of in front, calling the turns. She really loved the man, I guess. She spoke with pride to the family about his wonderful new interest in music, his progress in voice culture, his important artistic friends. And for once the sisters were gentle with her, saving their rage with Uncle Maish for explosive sessions after she left. I hung around the edge of angry family conclaves, trying to pick up some new juicy

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tidbit of the growing scandal. I'd seen enough Fox movies by then to have a delightfully confused idea about what was going on. I drew mental pictures of Uncle Maish and the Siren; in my mind she was someone like Barbara LaMarr and something like Circe too, a creature evil, voluptuous and of a beauty searing to the soul.

I finally got a look at her, one day when Uncle Maish was cleaning my teeth. (We didn't think much of him as a dentist but all the same we went to him. Partly it was family loyalty and partly that he never sent a bill.) At nine, the eyes are wonderfully sharp to catch a significant movement of the hand, a warning glance. I knew at once who she was when she walked in, with a certain swagger, and I knew also that I'd been had. She was a washout, middle-aged (probably thirty-five), skinny, homely, with an affected manner and a Yiddish accent which I took to be of the despised Galician origin.

(A couple of years later, I was to have another encounter with Sin, with Mr. Sussman and Miriam, who was beautiful enough to satisfy all my romantic demands. But then I would be involved, with the first smoky presagings of sex and a confusion of emotions beyond my ability to cope with or understand; only now do I realize that they adumbrated in my child mind the selfsame pattern of moral judgment that ultimately involves us all, with its tangled roots in jealousy and spite and secret desire.) Just now I was merely a spectator and my reactions were quite simple. I liked Aunt Minnie. But she was undeniably fat.

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If I'd found Uncle Maish actually in the clutches of a beautiful siren, weaving her fatal spell around him in his Dental Parlor, I'd have been quite ready to forgive him, maybe even to applaud him. I'd probably have given a title to the whole thing, like "Flesh and the Devil," or, "A Dentist's Remorse." My sharp surge of disapproval at the sight of the temptress had nothing to do with morals. For me Uncle Maish's crime went much deeper; it struck at the very heart of romance. Who would go to the movies if the Other Woman was drab and old and ugly? Perhaps I'd stumbled on a truth which only children can afford to face. Morality is the legal prose that makes life manageable. Glamour is the poetry that makes it worth living. I had nothing but contempt for Uncle Maish that day.

I don't know when Aunt Minnie began to be aware that there was something more going on between her Morris and the voice teacher than met the ear. When the panicky realization that she was losing her husband did hit her, she acted pretty silly. She hired a detective to shadow him and when she'd accumulated enough evidence to be sure, she went forth one night to confront the pair *in flagrante* and stage a showdown. She was going to do battle with the harlot and bring her man home. What she brought home instead was a black eye and a swollen jaw and a twinge in her back. This whole thing sounds suddenly more Irish than Jewish but that's how it was. Uncle Maish, evidently, had resented Aunt Minnie's tactics.

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She didn't leave him. Maybe it was the children, maybe the time. Divorce then, like murder, was unthinkable. It happened sometimes, but always in another neighborhood. Apart from anything else, I think it was simply that Aunt Minnie had put too much of herself into the man to let go. She'd bossed him and coddled him and fended for him—he was her life, actually, and you don't get prideful about giving up your life. *Madam Butterfly*, yes, but not a Jewish aunt in Brooklyn.

She took another tack. She realized now that she'd not been smart, letting herself go physically. Maybe she couldn't compete with the voice teacher on a high artistic plane but in the matter of looks she felt she still had some trumps to play. The slim body of her younger days would soon bring her Morris back to his senses. She undertook some drastic reducing treatments which had the most unlooked for and disastrous results. Something went terribly wrong—instead of losing weight, she began to gain at an alarming rate. Within six months she had put on almost a hundred pounds. She was mountainous. And she kept putting it on after that; nothing she ever did was successful in taking off an ounce.

And now Uncle Maish's fortunes began to wane. His practice deteriorated. His arty associates, while they had plenty of trouble with their teeth, had little money to pay for fixing them; the open scandal of his relationship with the voice teacher finally alienated the good people of Pitkin

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Avenue who took their adultery where decent people should: the men in the brothels and the ladies in the Cat-skills.

Uncle Maish had long been feeling that dentistry was a waste, indeed a crucifixion of his talents. His income declined as his aspirations soared. The last straw, as far as the family was concerned, was his decision to embark on a concert career. The first move was a recital in Town Hall to garner a sheaf of critical notices that would whet the appetite of managers and booking agents and maybe even prepare the way for a Metropolitan Opera audition.

If I thought the gods had any interest in what went on in Brooklyn, I'd say, "Whom the gods would destroy, they first drive mad." Any musician will tell you that, except for the top performers, concerts are an expensive luxury for the ego, usually ending up with a deficit. A manager may sometimes reluctantly invest in a Town Hall recital as a showcase for some extraordinarily endowed newcomer. But for an unknown of dubious talent it is now, and was then, a wild piece of folly. But Uncle Maish would listen to no one. Except Madame Fanya, or Tanya, whose voice, if not her looks, must have had some affinity with those girls who sat on the rocks, singing sailors of old to their watery graves. He hired an impresario and a publicity man, borrowing money on his insurance policies to foot the mounting bills. In the end, he was obliged to include a bonus with each free ticket to get people to attend—and then the house was only half filled.

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The family sent their tickets back, with a curse. Aunt Minnie paid some visits and implored her sisters to come, if only for the sake of the children. They consented finally and turned up in a body, no doubt grievously conflicted in their hope that this idiocy would somehow turn out all right and their conviction that the *Praguer golem* was about to finish the ruin and disgrace for his family that he'd been *shlepping* from the well.

Everyone's worst fears—or hopes—were realized. Uncle Maish was nervous. He sang off key a good part of the time. His voice wobbled. At one point he got confused about where he was in the program and started to sing "The Road to Mandalay" while the accompanist was playing the introduction to Schubert's "Erlkonig." The whole thing was an incredible shambles. The audience, being composed in good part of amateur shills, was restless and noisy. After intermission time, half of them didn't show up again. The critics, of course, failed him utterly. Most of them couldn't be bothered. Those who attended, the second-stringers, with their usual perversity missed all the good numbers and came up from the washroom only to hear the clinkers.

There were a few three-line reviews in the English papers next day; they were murder. The two Jewish papers, the *Tageblatt* and the *Daily Jewish Forward*, buried Uncle Maish with full Biblical ceremony. It all might have appeared on another page, over the caption: COONEY LEML GIVES A CONCERT.

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Uncle Maish took it very hard. He had a heart attack the following week. The voice teacher wrung her hands and went to the Catskills to escape "nervous prostration." She wasn't heard from again. Aunt Minnie was allowed to take over Uncle Maish's medicines and strict regimen. He was never able to work full time again. Aunt Minnie's jewelry went and the Louis XVI piano and the Regency furniture. The vocalizing was out too. Uncle Maish had neither the heart nor the stomach for it now.

The Amsters' fortunes never improved after that. They moved back into the old neighborhood, to a run-down railroad flat heavy with the smells of frying and rotting wood and the Appetizing Store below. That's where I mainly remember Aunt Minnie, when I went with my mother to visit. She herself never went anywhere now. It was difficult for her to get about and I suppose after all that had happened and the brilliance of her halcyon days, she preferred not to show herself. Her children didn't insist. Like myself, they were probably a little ashamed of her, of the mess she looked. The house itself didn't look any better. The parlor, where she sat overflowing a rocker, dressed in the manner of a haymow with a tarpaulin flung over it, was littered knee-high with papers and magazines and pamphlets and brochures and travel folders of every description. She'd become a bug on travel. She knew where you could go for how much, the best cruises to take, the best boats or the cheapest, depending on whether your object was pure re-

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laxation regardless of cost or whether thrift was a consideration; she knew all about sailing times, ports of call, cuisine, etc. Her specialty, I seem to recall, was coastwise voyages. "You go along the coast here," she would say, "stopping at Marseilles for the bouillabaisse, and then to Genoa and Naples and a couple of days for Capri and the Blue Grotto, then right along the coastline to the Straits of Messina. . . ."

She died that way, wedged into her rocker, with *Wonders of the Ancient World* and *The Glory That Was Greece* in her lap. When you're young, if you're fond of a person—for no better reason maybe than that she was fond of you, pushed your hair back sometimes from your face and asked if you were drinking enough milk, or saying, "Look, I swear he's not limping any more, you can hardly even notice, come here, darling, give your auntie a kiss," folding you into the great rank pillows of her breasts—if, as I say, you've really cared for someone, layered over though your feeling may have been with the thousand preoccupations and impatiences of childhood—you don't take kindly to her dying. You don't sit around, like the older people, trying to find a good word to say for death. It's impossible for you to imagine anything worse. But when you've become an older person yourself, your opinion of death improves. You realize that things being what they are, wiping the slate clean is sometimes a kind of cruel mercy. And another thing to be said for it—the dead don't

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have to be judged any more. You don't have to feel ashamed of them, or critical, or approve or disapprove. You can just love them, what they were or what they might have been, and leave the rest to chemistry, or God.

6

✿ So I've come down the shadowy years of a dream, past green islands hazy with the beat of powdery wings and beckoning with promise, through swamps dank with guilt and tangled longing, and I stop now, before I am done with remembrance, or remembrance is done with me, at a back yard of my youth where long ago my mind wrestled with the enigma of passion. I was a child, looking on, fearful and excited and involved in my own curious way in the drama being played by Mr. Sussman and his wife and the girl Miriam; their images come back to me mixed with all the equivocal scents and troubling overtones of spring—the sweet poison and terrible prod of desire, the eternal flowering from earth, rich and rotten with death.

Each house on our block had a yard of some sort, in back. It was the lure that had brought our honest burghers so far from their shops and offices into the wilderness of Brook-

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lyn: country living within easy access of the subway. It was a long while before the BMT actually pushed a spur out our way and it took a relatively short time after that for rural living to become a myth. But during those early years, all the men of the neighborhood fancied themselves in the role of country squire. They vied with each other in the cultivation of their gardens, which looked no different, I suppose, than some millions of other gardens, then and now, throughout suburbia: morning glories climbing frailly up the walls of the back porch, lilac, syringa, rosebushes; perhaps a tiny grape arbor like the Sussmans had, or a struggling small fruit tree—peach or plum or cherry. And always the centerpiece designs of flowers—zinnias, phlox, pinks, nasturtiums, delphinium—laid out as if with calipers and T square.

Some of the more enterprising of our neighbors even went in for truck gardening in a small way, and if ever so much as a puckered tomato or a wizened radish was successfully brought to harvest it was the occasion for a community *Sacre de l'automne*. We were not, by any stretch of the imagination, a green-thumbed community. Whenever I think of our gardening activities, it's to recall the women moving about clumsily with their rakes and packages of seed; the children stepping off the swings into the soft newly seeded loam and getting smacked; the men tripping over their garden hoses or watering cans.

There is a new race of Jews growing up in Israel who are warriors and farmers, as good as any in the world; their

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leathery frames and hard hands have wrenched a flowering and fruitful land from desert and marsh. But the men on our block were of a different breed. Pushcarts, shops, warehouses, pavements—these were their milieu. For hundreds of years their fathers before them had been hiding behind the ghetto walls of Europe, in synagogue basements, in countinghouses where gold pieces and bales of goods provided a momentary illusion of immunity against the next bath of blood. Torrents of hate had swept them off the earth and into the walled places, washed them clean of their affinity with green and growing things. Small wonder that they turned now for abundance to the market place rather than to the soil. That in their yards, home from their shops and offices on Saturday afternoons, with their plump, white hands gingerly clipping their hedges or spraying their rose-bushes, they looked alien somehow, sadly out of place. They had lost the earth, and with it the beauty that lives for many men, as part of their heritage, in growing shapes dark against the sky. But it still haunted them, returning in smells, in twisted little ghosts of flower forms on window sills, in the dreams that rose like vapor from the crowded narrow walled places of their lives—the pitiless mirage shapes of pride, of dignity, of no more running, no more blood.

The Sussmans lived directly back of us, on Herzl Street. And it is the image of Mrs. Sussman that comes most strongly to my mind now—of her tall, distinguished form with its curiously attractive suggestion of sparseness under

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the gaping folds of a housedress, moving about her little garden in an aura of mystery and melancholy. It's as if, even before Miriam came, I'd always seen beside her the shadow of Rapaccini's daughter, forever shut out from the world among the bright shapes of her roses and gladiolas.

Alone among our effortfully bucolic neighbors Mrs. Sussman looked at home with a trowel or pruning shears in her hand, as if she belonged with the earth and growing things. I suppose it's because she looked so little like the rest, so little like a Jewess. With her lean height, her straight light brown hair and sad gray eyes set wide in a plain, bony, intelligent face, she might have been a farm woman from up-state, or the wife of a Congregationalist minister, or almost anything in fact but what she was, the daughter of a rabbi somewhere in the Middle West—Ohio, I think—and the wife of a well-to-do retailer in the neighborhood.

By the criteria that mattered with us she was a most fortunate wife. That her husband was a man of generous spirit, inquiring mind, and happy disposition as he undoubtedly was, didn't hurt, of course. But what counted was that he was that pearl of great price, a good provider. Actually the Sussmans appeared to enjoy the kind of quiet, undemanding companionship that mature women dream about. There was only one circumstance to account for the aura of unhappiness which Mrs. Sussman trailed about with her like an invisible dark scarf. She was childless, in a community where a wife who was childless was like a tree standing bare against the summer sky.

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There had been a baby born to them but it was something that was discussed guardedly. I remember my parents whispering about it shortly after the Sussmans moved into the neighborhood. The baby had lived only a few hours. "Fortunately," my mother had said, and a wall of hush had gone up around the word. *Fortunately*. It hung over my mind for a long time afterward, like winter weather, full of chill and foreboding. What circumstance could make it fortunate for a baby to die? I wrestled with the thought but it remained a vague calamitous thing which contained also, oddly, a half-fearful fascination I couldn't define.

Whatever it was that had happened, and whatever its implications, Naomi Sussman had had no more children. And it was evident, despite the fortunate circumstances in which she lived and her loving relationship with her husband, that she was at the core of her being, an unfulfilled and lonely woman. Even before her niece Miriam came to join that fated little group at 433 Herzl Street, she kept very much to herself in the seclusion of her house and her garden.

Mr. Sussman, on the other hand, was a gregarious sort. He was often at our house, being equally fond of my father and a "good argument." He was, as I remember him, a good-looking man, tall, about six feet, heavy-shouldered, with a largish humorous face, a wide curly mouth, and thick-growing wavy black hair that made a crescent of his forehead.

I gather that, like my father, he was what passed in our circle for an "intellectual." This involved, at the time, a hospitality toward certain radical notions like free love

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and socialism, which were as repugnant to the good Jews of our community as to good Baptists, or Catholics, or decent God-fearing people anywhere. This may come as a surprise to my Gentile friends, as well as my two Gentile wives who share a naïve belief that most Jews are either international bankers, or dangerous radicals at heart. The fact is the average Jewish community can give Main Street cards and spades in its attitude toward the left—matters political, religious and aesthetic. Joe Sussman, I surmise, was given to the kind of forthright honesty in his thinking that disturbs people and puts them on the defensive. He spoke, in other words, more plainly than judiciously. I think it was a surface bluntness though, designed more than anything else to cover up an innate shyness, a wonderful gentleness—almost an innocence—of spirit. But it was one of the things, as I think of it now, that went into the hemlock brew which was being prepared for him.

It's quite possible that my impression of the man as an extremely attractive, kindly, and engaging fellow may rest more on my recollection of how my father regarded him than on the sum of my own firsthand judgments. He was one of the few people in the neighborhood of whom my father was genuinely fond. The two must have felt in each other a kindred spirit. They both read Artsibashev and Zola and Gorki and Kropotkin, endorsed free love and the franchise for women, thought Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger great women and Tolstoi a mossback, recited Heine and Pushkin at each other in night-school Ger-

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man and Russian, considered Socialism inevitable and were down, between themselves, on the Talmud—though they didn't generally go so far as to flaunt this last in public.

Along with his heretical views and his honesty, Sussman must have had a good head for business on his shoulders, for he had built up a flourishing trade in retail furs on Pitkin Avenue. If you go often to the movies, as I did when I was a boy, and read the smooth-paper magazines regularly, you will realize why I was confused by what happened, why it is only now that I begin to understand that a Jewish furrier may be undone by a dream of beauty, just as swiftly and completely as John Gilbert—or Narcissus for that matter—ever was.

Her name was Miriam. To me that has an ineradicably lovely and haunting sound, though its meaning in Hebrew, I understand, is "bitter." She was a niece of Mrs. Sussman. I seem to recall that she was an orphan, her parents having perished in a flood somewhere in the Middle West. Whatever else about her I must leave to surmise, I am sure of this much now. For Joe Sussman, in the months that followed her arrival at his house—however he may have tried to keep her image in perspective—she became that dream of womanhood, that something white and shimmery, that Demeter whom all men acknowledge in their hearts, and kneel to.

Of the girl herself it is tones, impressions rather than a photograph, that my memory retains. She was sixteen and I was eleven and whatever I remember is filtered through

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the murk of my own feelings about her. She was beautiful, I know, and soft and feminine—and everything that Naomi Sussman was not, as a woman. I see her coming into the yard with a towel around her shoulders, rinsing her beautiful chestnut hair in the keg of rain water the Sussmans kept beside the porch, sitting in the sun afterward and combing it; and the words of “Die Lorelei” which my mother used to sing are threaded through the scene as in a woven tapestry in my mind. I see the older woman come out of the house to fuss over her niece, making finger waves in her hair or braids, tying the long plaits with red bows; there is a sound of laughter, the woman’s low and controlled, the girl’s pealing, and as if in echo I hear a spiteful voice, thrown like acid into a smiling face: “Harem . . . like concubines in a harem.” The words smear out the sun and the brightness and laughter and leave a thundercloud over the recollection, waiting to break in awful retribution over our lives.

What a tangle of images. Was it only Mrs. Sussman and Miriam there in the yard? Or were Ruth and Naomi there too? “Whither thou goest, there will I go.” How comes Rapaccini’s daughter into the wilds of Brooklyn where my Cousin Rachel from Riverside Drive feared to tread? And Rapunzel? And the raven hair of the mad Lady Ligeia? And Ophelia’s drowned tresses? What paths had they traveled to a Jewish furrier’s back yard? And Bess, the landlord’s black-eyed daughter, plaiting a dark red love knot into her long black hair? In my dreams, those days and nights, I was a highwayman, riding, riding, to save the

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lovely, sinful girl from her doom, clattering and clanging in the dark innyard, tall in the stirrups to reach her hand, the tallest, ridingest eleven-year-old in the West Countree, reining in to snatch a kiss from her harlot's lips, hating her and loving her, and dead at last in the road with a bunch of lace at my throat, my pitying and unforgiving heart stilled forever.

Was Mrs. Sussman aware of what was happening? I think she must have been, almost from the first. She was in love with her husband and she was a woman of unusual sensibility. She must have been aware of those overtones of her husband's growing love for the girl that were beyond concealment: little unconscious tendernesses followed by self-conscious gruffness; sudden flarings of high spirits alternating with spurts of unaccustomed irritability; the too careful matter-of-factness in discussing questions of Miriam's future.

I think she must have known. But she had set out to mother this orphaned girl and to the end her attitude toward Miriam never changed. Perhaps at first it had been merely her Jewish feeling of responsibility toward an unfortunate relative. But I'm sure it was much more than that at the end. Miriam was a beautiful child: her youth, her softness, her very dependence must have reached down into some hunger in Mrs. Sussman that went deeper finally than outraged pride and possessiveness. I know that she rose above those womanly prerogatives. And I know that it would have been much better, somehow, if she hadn't. For

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it was, in a way, her very success in understanding, in rising above her blind hurt, that undid her, and the others with her. The message comes to me clearly now, clear and somber as the tolling of a bell: To sin is human and may be condoned. But to forgive is divine—and woe to him on this earth who tampers with divine prerogatives.

I can see her there in the yard, standing over this child who had grown so mysteriously entwined with her motherhood and wifehood—no doubt brutally hurt, hardly knowing where to turn between hurt and pride and her will to forgive, and all the while hovering over the girl like a restrained mother hen, fussing with her hair. I can see so clearly the mounting significance of every casual interchange between Joe Sussman and his niece, significance unwanted, fought against, but always there, growing—a chance brushing of hands, eyes meeting suddenly across a room, the sudden crowded little silences. . . . The first kiss behind the stair, with each trying to behave as if it is still uncle and niece between them and knowing it isn't, ashamed and frightened, and yet moving resistlessly to other kisses, with the mind closed, possessed, enthralled, going deeper and deeper into a waking dream, catching oneself now and again with a feeling of complete disbelief, panic, sudden hot guilt and fierce resolve—resolve fading again like mist in a touch or a glance—until the last gate swings open, and there is no more choice, no more turning back than when death is the summons, into the final embrace where shame and scruple and past and present roar

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away in a sudden blaze of meaning for the way one is made, and for what, and the whole story of one's life, of all lives, is spoken in a choked word, "beloved," containing all one knows and will ever know of himself and God.

I can see Joe Sussman lying awake, night after night, staring at the ceiling, aware of the still, spare form of his wife beside him, turning to look at her with helpless anguish—and listening meanwhile to the sound of her breathing, wondering if he dare risk getting out of bed and going to Miriam—and suddenly aghast at the direction of his thought, the horrified realization: "The girl's here as your charge, you're old enough to be her father—God, man, what are you thinking of?"

I don't know just when suspicion began to flower in our neighborhood. I know that in any neighborhood, wherever life flames a little more brightly with some heightened quality of aliveness or urgency, there is always suspicion—and envy—waiting to extinguish it. The jokes Sussman listened to are standard; one has heard them often, the vulgar ribbing—usually characterized as good-natured—about an older man having such a good-looking young girl in the house. One hears the spiteful voices of the women and the barbed remarks of the young men who'd called on Miriam and never received any encouragement to call again, the impersonal innuendoes of Miss G., head saleslady in Mr. Sussman's store, concerning the basis for her boss's undeniably erratic behavior. . . . There is no need to frame the words that were used. They can be heard, any day, in any

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street—spoken without any special malice, just out of some great impersonal malice toward everything that reaches beyond the confines of cautious, narrow, grudging lives.

I faced a problem about that time, as I recall. I'd always liked Mr. Sussman, I felt that we were friends and the code was that you stuck up for friends, even when there was unpleasantness or a fight involved. I wasn't even clear in my mind about what it was he was doing that was getting our people down on him. What I did know was that it involved Miriam with whom I was hopelessly in love, so hopelessly and ridiculously that I couldn't even admit it to myself. I might as well have had a donkey's head and been in love with the queen. So I could only retreat from the whole situation in sullen and smoldering contempt—for Mr. Sussman, for Miriam, for all women of her age and for all old geezers who had anything to do with them.

One day Mrs. Sussman was gone, quietly. Home for a visit—that was the report left with the tradespeople and with her maid, Jenny. The women on the block looked at each other significantly. Was she crazy, leaving that young girl alone in the house with her husband? Suspicion quickened, eyes on the house from behind hedges and curtains, watching the goings and comings of Mr. Sussman. I can recall the atmosphere of tension that hung over the neighborhood; we looked at the house on Herzl Street with a mixture of apprehension and excitement, not knowing just what to expect, but expecting something.

And one day it came, a buzz of excited whispering that

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riffled the curtains, rustled through the hedges, echoed through our streets. I don't know how the news got out. But it's not hard to imagine Jenny, the Sussman's maid, whispering first among the other maids about the things going on right under her mistress's nose; then, when Mrs. Sussman had gone, moving about the house with eyes and ears alert, noting her master's harassed demeanor, observing Miriam at the breakfast table, food untouched, face a little greenish and drawn; coming upon her finally, perhaps, in a faint on the bathroom floor. . . .

Not documentary evidence, of course, any of it. No one could really be *sure* that Miriam was pregnant, or if she was, that her uncle was to blame. But everyone seemed willing to take that chance. We saw our mothers turn their backs now, or cross the street, or become suddenly absorbed in the condition of their fingernails whenever they saw Miriam or Mr. Sussman approaching. We knew what that meant. I remember standing about on the fringes of deep conversations among the older boys about babies and Sin. Some of the bolder spirits among us advocated taking a hand in Retribution ourselves and putting a few rocks through the Sussman windows. It's easy to imagine what happened to trade at his store.

For a while, before the infection of shame and embarrassment reached even between him and my father, Mr. Sussman continued to drop in at our house. At first this worried me until I realized that for some reason, instead of losing caste for me with the boys on the block, it actually gained

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me a modicum of prestige. I'd been avoiding Mr. Sussman for a time, I'd crossed him off my list. Now I began to notice him again. And I recollect I found him a distinct disappointment—though I never admitted this to the fellows when I was being pumped by them about “how did he look?” “What did he say?” “Did you hear anything?” The fact is, I think that secretly I'd expected Sin to cut rather more of a figure, to step mincingly on cloven feet in an aura of sulphur fumes—or at least to wear some kind of recognizable dark effulgence, like a brand of Cain on the forehead. But there had never been anything remotely sinister about Joe Sussman, and there wasn't now. He seemed, if anything, a little scared—the habitual humorous comportment of his mouth changed now, and his explosive laughter, that had always crescendoed into a coda of low deep chuckling in his throat, becoming a little forced. I remember now—that especially struck me. It seemed odd enough that Sin should be just a neighborhood furrier with an address around the block. That he should look scared too seemed rather more than inappropriate. It was a fraud.

Mrs. Sussman was away a long time, almost two months. The neighborhood prophets shook their heads with dark knowledge. They had certain sources—inside information. Mrs. Sussman wasn't coming back. And one day she returned, as quietly as she had gone. Tension in the neighborhood mounted to a new high. What now? A wave of excited speculation swept through our streets. Was she going to

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throw the girl out? Would she get a divorce? Or would she perhaps refuse to give Sussman a divorce so he could marry that whore?

Again we were waiting, half fearfully, for the inevitable explosion that would blow the lid off 433 Herzl Street. We half expected, I guess, to hear a girl's shrill scream in the night, or the ragged hoarse cry of a man staggering to the door with a kitchen knife in his throat. To no one, absolutely no one, did the possibility occur of the amazing, incredible, unspeakable thing that actually did happen.

One day a hired carriage rolled up in front of the Sussmans'. Presently, Mrs. Sussman came out of the house, followed by Miriam. The older woman was carrying a suitcase and on the steps Miriam tried to take it away from her. But Mrs. Sussman resisted and they were still fussing about it when they got to the carriage. There Mrs. Sussman took the girl's arm and helped her up the high step, giving her a little shove finally on the backside. It all seemed to be following an expected pattern. The confusing thing was that both women were laughing as the carriage rolled off.

In the next weeks our confusion grew. Mrs. Sussman had returned, that afternoon, alone. Obviously she had at last come to her senses and sent the girl packing. It was a quieter denouement than some of us had secretly been hoping for. Still, it settled the matter. But *was* it settled? An unusual activity seemed to have descended on the Sussman household now. We could hear a carpenter at work on the upper

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floor. Packages from Namm's Department Store and A. and S.'s and Altman's kept arriving for several days. Evidently Mrs. Sussman was on a buying spree of some sort.

And then, on an afternoon about six weeks after Miriam had gone away, the same carriage rolled up in front of the Sussman house. Mrs. Sussman got out, holding a small bundle in her arms that couldn't be anything but a baby. She turned and held out her hand to a familiar slender figure emerging from the carriage behind her. It was Miriam looking a little taller than when we had seen her last and more beautiful than ever. She swayed slightly as she stepped to the sidewalk. Mrs. Sussman took her arm and they went together toward the house. A while later they were in the yard, Mrs. Sussman helping the girl to a chair, arranging the cushions behind her, bringing her a glass of milk. During the ensuing weeks she was always in attendance on Miriam, helping her with the baby, the two of them fussing over it together, crowing over it.

We looked on in stunned unbelief. This thing we saw couldn't actually be happening; it was the wildest sort of fantasy. These people had sinned and been sinned against, and now, instead of dedicating themselves to perpetuating the mess into which passion had led them, they had determined to understand, to forgive. They had made peace with a difficult situation and they were now going on to try and make a good life for themselves, regardless. It just wasn't possible—it wasn't *human* at all. We hung on, still waiting hopefully for the explosion, the cry in the night.

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But the weeks went by and gradually the awful truth came home to us. There was going to be no explosion, no murder, no divorce—nothing. Just nothing but understanding, forgiveness. . . .

Then it was that horror began to grow on us. Until now we had understood what was happening with the Sussmans. Mr. Sussman was a rascal, Miriam was a Jezebel in the house of her benefactress, Mrs. Sussman was a betrayed wife. Quite possibly it had been rather pleasant for our honest burghers and their wives to feel sorry for her and reflect that she was being made a fool of in the business, poor thing. That fitted into an accepted social pattern. All could sit in judgment, glowering at the guilty, bestowing sympathy where sympathy was due.

But now? What could one feel superior about in this situation? Where was the pound of flesh for the outraged household gods? Where was the example for the growing children? This thing rocked the structure of morality to its very foundation. And there is a time-honored custom for dealing with that sort of thing, that started, with us at least, on Golgotha.

Ostracism, I imagine, came first. We had all of us, even the children, got used to the idea that there was some good reason for pulling our mouths to the side and compressing our lips when we saw Mr. Sussman or Miriam; we didn't even bother to remember why any more, we just did it. It was a simple transition to carry this attitude over to Mrs. Sussman now, forgetting entirely that a brief while before

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we'd very much enjoyed sympathizing with her. Don't ask me what else was done. A community has resources when it decides on a bit of quiet lynching. I know that after a while we hardly ever saw Mrs. Sussman in the street any more. Once in a while we'd see Miriam come out to do the shopping, in the increasingly frequent interims between maids. Jenny of course had left, unable to withstand the social pressure from other maids in the neighborhood. None of the subsequent girls Mrs. Sussman was able to get lasted very long. So we would get a glimpse of Miriam now and again—thinner than before but still lovely as a dream—hurrying along the street to and from the stores with her head held high and the cords standing out a little in her throat.

More and more, as the invisible moat of their exile deepened about the lives of these three, the two women turned to each other for companionship and solace. They were always together in the yard. And it was impossible to doubt, watching them as they sat talking, or reading to each other, or tending the baby, that they had become sisters and friends, and mother and daughter.

"Like concubines in a harem," was the way the neighbors described it, their horrified eyes on the Sussman yard.

The end came slowly but inevitably. No right-thinking woman in the neighborhood, of course, would trade at Mr. Sussman's store any longer. About the time it began to be pretty generally known that his business was "on the

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skids," one of the elders of the synagogue came through with a really brilliant bit of inspiration. The thing hadn't been done in anyone's memory. He called together a number of the more devout members of the congregation, and several days later Joe Sussman received a formal bill of excommunication. A year before he'd have laughed, that heart-warming chuckle deep in his throat; maybe he'd have sent back a letter thanking the gentry for honoring him as several hundred years before they'd honored a much greater man, Spinoza. But now—I can see him, scared, unbelieving, not knowing where to turn against this resistless tide sweeping him into disaster. By turns defiant and desperate, finally putting in an appearance before an assemblage of his inquisitors. "Why are you hounding me?" His eyes, his fine humorous intelligent eyes, hunted now, pleading. "Why are you intent on ruining me? What have I done to you?"

I wonder now why he didn't get out, move with his family to some place where his iniquity was not known and where he could make a new life for himself. Maybe it's because the mind is actually competent to grasp only little calamities, and the finality of disaster eludes it so that one goes on from day to day, like the Jews in Hitler's Germany, unable really to believe, hoping against hope that there will be some change, until suddenly the realization comes that one is lost, and it is too late to do anything. Sussman's business was here, his home, the life he had made. Perhaps he

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had an unconscious understanding that his trouble was not a matter of geography but of people—that ultimately it wouldn't make any difference where he lived.

It took about a year and a half for the job to be completed. Sussman had been trying to attract business from out of the neighborhood by distributing circulars in other sections advertising ruinously low prices. To this the women responded by furtive, unofficial picketing; ladies who came to Sussman's store were warned against dealing with an unnatural monster who was living at peace with two women at one time in one house.

Finally a suit was started for nonpayment of an overdue bill. Mr. Sussman ran a sale, placarding his window with signs that read *GOING OUT OF BUSINESS*. I don't think he really intended to even then; he was merely subscribing to the general formula for sales in the neighborhood. Within the week, two additional suits were begun by creditors. There was no cash available with which to settle these matters and they went to judgment by default. Execution was issued and a marshal was directed to take charge and arrange for a sale at auction to satisfy the judgments. The following morning when the marshal came to take over and post his notices, he discovered Joe Sussman hanging from a rack by his necktie with his knees bent.

My father was among the first to see him after they cut him down. He hadn't done a neat job. Evidently he'd had to jump a couple of times to get it finished. He'd been hanging for some time—probably from the previous night

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when he'd been wandering about the store, after everyone else had gone, realizing all at once that this was the end, that he was through; thinking of the two women and his heavy insurance on which the annual premium was due within a few weeks.

He wasn't, my father assured us all, a pretty sight. It seemed to prey on his mind and he talked about it a great deal during the ensuing months. He wasn't careful about us children not hearing, either. My mother used to remonstrate with him about it, I remember, but he paid no attention to her strictures. He kept saying it was undoubtedly the finest community murder we were ever likely to produce and he wanted us to know all about it. He would go into Rosov's Dairy Restaurant on Bates Avenue, where most of the better-grade merchants in the neighborhood and several elders of our synagogue foregathered at noon to eat pickled fish and borsch and noodle kugel, and sitting down at table with several of them, peering around at their plates with his squinting eyes, he would start talking about it.

"Ach," he would say, conversationally, "that was a sight to see. You knew Joe Sussman, didn't you?" He would raise his voice to call across to Mr. Rosov, standing apprehensively behind his cash register, "You knew him, Rosov? He used to come here once in a while. A nice-looking fellow, no? Remember the way he used to laugh, deep in his throat? You should have seen what he looked like when they took him down from that rack. I'm telling you, you

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never saw anything like it. It was something to see, something to give joy to a Cossack's heart, his eyes bulging out . . .”

Of course it wasn't the thing to do. It was morbid. And I don't think my father got any real satisfaction out of it. He was just sick, sick to death, and hot and raving. But it doesn't do any sort of good—that kind of revenge. These people weren't monsters. They were ordinary folk like you and me from whom, under ordinary circumstances, one could expect kindness—sometimes justice—even generosity.

And it doesn't do any sort of good to rebuke them, to keep ramming their own terrible humanness down their throats the way my father did. They felt bad enough. I'm sure all the people who had anything to do with hounding Sussman to death felt pretty awful about it when he finally killed himself. All the hardness and justification they went in for afterward were merely defenses against their own feeling of guilt. And give them six months to forget and they'd do the same thing all over again.

The community turned out en masse and gave Mr. Sussman a really impressive funeral. Since he was a suicide he couldn't be interred in hallowed ground, but our rabbi himself undertook to make excuses for Mr. Sussman to God, citing his many good qualities, his generosity, his charity and so on. Afterwards the women tried to make it up to Miriam and the older woman. It was unfortunate that it was a little too late. When you've lynched somebody,

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crucified him, it doesn't do much good to send the widow a basket of fruit and tell her how sorry you are. The two had grown accustomed to living their own lives independent of the community; despite all advances now they kept to themselves and their own devices. The house belonged to Mrs. Sussman, and the insurance, a considerable sum, had come to her as beneficiary immune from the demands of Mr. Sussman's creditors.

Perhaps if the baby had lived, they might have gone on, sufficient to themselves, their lives bound up in recreating Joe Sussman whom they'd both loved. But the boy died the following year, of diphtheria. Mrs. Sussman put the house up for sale and they moved away. What became of them I've no notion. It's strange for me to think that if Miriam lives at all she will be nearing fifty, the beauty which once she wore so bright in her lovely supple form stiffening now into a waiting carapace of death.

Soon afterward we too moved, to Chicago, that toddlin' town, where we lived with Grandpa and Grandma Gottlieb on the South Side while my father tried to establish himself in the skirt business. He never made it. He ground up his life trying. But no one ever again pulled a magic lever for him in Paris or China, or Paterson, New Jersey. He never again found that magic bolt of wool jersey under the rainbow. As for me, I was soon struck down by puberty, my brain cloudy, night and day, with visions of exotic houris and native whores, driven by nameless ambitions and most urgently by the need to find some prepara-

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tion, not greasy, that would make my hair stay down. The memory of Miriam was quickly erased. Or so I thought. I think now that in some way she has been part of every relationship I've ever had with a woman. As I feel also that some part of communal guilt for the lynching of Joe Sussman is mine. I wished him ill, fashioning of envy and rancor, in the manner of my elders, a hood of righteous judgment, to set me side by side with them, charter member in Genteel Murder, Inc. I know now that eleven is not too early to join.

7

✿ It COMES to me, very late, that forgetfulness has been for me not a soft spot in the brain or a vitamin deficiency but a way of life, a deliberate device for closing doors on my past, fearing its intrusion, perhaps, its power to deflect me from my purposes, whatever they have been. There has come with this a kind of pervasive loneliness, as if one had succeeded too well in closing himself into a single, present room. And when I've needed to dramatize that loneliness, to conceive myself as Hamlet rather than merely Scrooge or Silas Marner, I've given to Time the role of daft sexton who follows me about to shovel my life away, my days and nights with all their content, as soon as they are behind me, the same short shrift for what I've loved with what never touched me at all, leaving only here and there, with lunatic caprice, a bright clear image for me to ponder over in the witching hours: a scrawl of chalk on

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an El post in Brooklyn, or a blue jar in the window of Anton Brooscharg, Druggist, on Cottage Grove Avenue in Chicago, who carried a stock of cut-rate—and faulty—contraceptives.

Living in Southern California for many years abetted me in this curious—one might almost say purposeful—amnesia. It is a land without yesterdays. It has no history, or none worth remembering. Lotus is featured on the menus of all the good restaurants. Lethe Wharf is the ancient name for Malibu and movies are the fat weeds that grow on it. The weather helps. There is no way to mark the passing of the seasons except by the calendar, which no one looks at except at tax time and option time. In general one day is like another, your life slips by featurelessly, sun-dappled, in a kind of languidly passionate embrace with Now. Spells of inclemency are rare. Despite all disparaging talk by Easterners about rain and smog, if you die in winter there is an excellent chance you will be healthily tanned when they fit you into your coffin.

The alexin of our cure, wrote Thomas Wolfe, grows by a mountain rock. He was a man for mountains. Perhaps it's not strange that mine came wrapped in that twenty-year-old dinner jacket I've mentioned and that I should now be convalescing from forgetfulness in a New York apartment, exhuming my buried past from a little red pot on a window sill across the street.

It was a few months ago, in California, that the dinner

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jacket came to light. I was working on the score of a movie I'd finished, or thought I'd finished, a month before. It had been recorded and dubbed and now the director had summoned me, unexpectedly, to a meeting at the studio. It appeared that the executives and the sales department were disappointed in the score. The producer had run the picture several times just to listen, "praying that he was wrong," as he said. But his feeling of disappointment had persisted. He had taken the picture home and run it in his private projection room to check his reactions with those of his wife and twelve-year-old son. They had confirmed him in his feeling of dissatisfaction. The boy, particularly, had not been "convinced" by the music.

It was too late for me to rewrite the entire score, or to have it rewritten by someone else, but the director had begged me to come up with something new for at least one crucial sequence—this was a place in the story where the boy recognizes that he is no good for the girl, he can only drag her down, and so he has decided to give her up. I thought I'd written some quite acceptable recognition-of-unworthiness music, or rather that Rachmaninoff had done so, since I'd borrowed a phrase (heavily veiled in twelve-tone harmonies) from the slow movement of his Second Piano Concerto, which incidentally contains some of the best despair music for movies ever written. However, what the director hoped for was something different, something the young people would find "convincing";

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something, in fact, that would "tear their guts out." The devotion of Hollywood movie makers to their public is sometimes expressed in savage terms.

My ego was abraded but I couldn't afford—or thought I couldn't—to get touchy just then, with the expenses attendant on a new house I'd bought popping up around me like hydra heads. (I don't suppose Beethoven or Schubert—or Rachmaninoff for that matter—ever had to face a situation like this. They may have had other problems but they didn't have alimony and a Bentley and a house in Holmby Hills with a Carrara marble fireplace that once belonged to D'Annunzio.)

The revised section had to be ready by the end of the week for recording and rerecording. (Without getting technical, what this entails is that musicians are contracted for, to begin work on a given day, a whole symphony orchestra of them, and any delay costs the studio hundreds of dollars an hour.) I was frankly bogged down. You need a certain amount of inspiration even to steal effectively and my Pegasus had quit like a dog. I was trying to bang my way through the impasse, on the piano, feeling the tight knot of panic forming under my ribs that so often in the last fifteen years has substituted for my stomach while I was working. I heard my wife call out from the hall.

"I wish, darling, you'd come take a look at these things. There seems to be a powerful lot of junk we don't need."

I didn't recognize the horn notes of fate woven through her words. I banged harder on the piano. I must say for

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Eileen that she was always very sympathetic to the demands of concentration made by my work and very good about not disturbing me. But ever since she'd got word that the new house was ready to move into she'd been caught up in a fever of anticipation, rummaging in quiet frenzy through closets and bins and cartons.

"Please come look," she called again, "and tell me what I can throw away. It'll just take a minute."

I gave up and went into the hall where she stood awash in a small sea of jetsam. "Wouldn't it be simpler," I suggested, "just to take the stuff along and put it in the store-room? Save an awful lot of time."

"Now be reasonable, dear. There's no point carting all this old junk over to our beautiful new house."

It was beautiful. Two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, and a bargain. With a free-form swimming pool, tennis courts, two acres of ground and a magnificent view of one of the most uninteresting cities in the world. I looked at the pile of relics Eileen had collected. They didn't belong in a beautiful new house, certainly. Moldering magazines, discarded notebooks, the warped form of an old tennis racket, a much-scuffed brief case . . .

"You just hate to throw anything away, don't you?" she said, balanced between whimsical appreciation and ripening irritation for my oddities. "I'll bet you haven't even *looked* at this stuff in years."

She was right. As I said, I've always suffered from—or enjoyed—almost total unrecall. And I've never liked rak-

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ing things up. Let the dead past bury its dead. At the same time I've always hated to throw anything away. I freely acknowledge that for a wife this contradictory relationship to the past might be quite maddening.

Just now the past wore even for me a curiously irrelevant and haphazard air, like an old peddler's cart. I noted, without any real sense of recognition, a Tyrolean hat with a green feather, a jig and whetstone for sharpening ice skates. . . . My eye lit on a more familiar object, a record player I'd bought years ago, secondhand, for ten dollars. That was the price I'd got for an article in *Etude*, entitled, with youthful grimness, "What Music Means to Me."

"Where on earth did this come from?" I heard Eileen say. She was holding up a jacket that was gray with dust. I squinted at it. For a moment it meant nothing to me. Then I remembered.

"What's the matter?" Eileen said.

"Why can't you let things alone?" I felt a little sick. "Why do you have to keep sticking your nose into things? I don't go poking around in your belongings."

"My goodness," she said, "you don't have to bite my head off. It's just an old dinner jacket."

She put it on a hanger and snickered.

"What's so funny?"

"I'm sorry." She laughed. "It looks so *skinny*."

I felt a little ashamed for it. It did look ridiculous, with its pinched-in waist and narrow, pointy lapels like rabbit's ears. I remembered how it had looked new, lying in a box,

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plumply folded in crisp tissue, the heavy satin facing gleaming like black onyx. It was filmed and grayish now, like a cataracted eye.

"Isn't it funny about styles?" Eileen said. "I'll bet when you first bought it—"

"I didn't buy it," I said in a voice that I heard with astonishment, unaccountably choked. "It was a present."

Eileen must have sensed an unexplored alcove. "From whom?"

"My Uncle Ben."

She eyed me curiously. "You never told me you had an Uncle Ben."

My throat was dry. He was there suddenly, sitting on the edge of my bed in his shabby blue robe, puffing on a hand-rolled cigarette, watching me with his too-bright eyes. . . . I tossed the jacket down alongside the rusty jig, the broken record player, the discarded music notebooks.

"It was a long time ago," I said.

I'd planned to work that evening but I didn't get much done. I kept going back (in odd nudgings of remembrance that would appear like separate vignettes, preluded each by a separate little pang of feeling) to the gloomy flat on the South Side of Chicago where we lived for some years with Grandpa and Grandma Gottlieb and where Uncle Ben came to stay for a few months after he'd left the sanitarium in Saranac. Mostly the recollections came in tones of gray—gray Chicago winters, the gray University build-

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ings where learning of the same color was housed, gray figures crossing the Midway, remote and lonely in the chilly light of morning, heads ducked against the wind that blew down the long sweep from the lake; a remembered fuzzy feeling in the head that was gray too, like dust mice, that came of too much cramming for exams, too many hours at the piano, in the hypnotic drudgery of *Gradus ad Parnassum*, and too little sleep. It all went with a kind of alto music in my mind, filled with an ache of longing, of depthless sorrow, like an oboe sobbing in a swamp, or the *shophar* sounding the Day of Atonement.

But with it came another sort of music, sudden crystal shimmerings against the gray background of days. Always this was Mab, walking (inert, earthbound word for the movement of that girl through my mind) to the strains of Debussy, evoking, like paper snow in a windowed Easter egg, the promise of a world that never was, spun of Tiffany glass and seed pearls and taffeta, instead of dime-store porcelain and bombazine and the smell of chicken fat.

I wanted to run out of the house, to run from those memories, to shut my mind and my heart against them. There was a too-muchness about it all, too many tonalities reaching for long-vacated listening posts; they set me quaking inside, as if in fear of a tide of response, grief, longing, tears, that would tear me loose from my secure and comfortable life, maybe even from my reason. But I wanted to stay too and listen. One thing that troubled me deeply was that for all the power of that remembered image of Mab, I

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couldn't remember her real name. It was she who had made owning that dinner jacket so desperate a need for me. Her father had an office on La Salle Street—Somebody, Something and Somebody, Investment Securities. I could see it, the windows half green, the lower half, the letters gold. . . . Mab was the nickname she used, and it was the only one I could remember. She lived in Winnetka—that belonged, and the big black car driven by a big black chauffeur in which she came into town on Saturdays to take her music lesson.

How was it our stars had crossed? Music? Steinway Hall? I took lessons at the Conservatory but I got a special rate and came at odd hours, mornings or evenings, when Professor Lubachek could fit me in. No. Something far from Beethoven and Brahms—something about vici kid, I seemed to remember dimly—a fragile leather much prized by old ladies at the time, tanned from the sorrowful hide of unborn calves. Mab had a charge account at Field's where I worked in the Misses Shoe Department Saturdays, Tuesdays and Thursdays after school. She wore a five triple-A shoe and referred to her father as Dad, in a high sweet voice, and this, with her wonderful Gentile face, made a special kind of music, not intellectual at all, more like the movies which I managed to crowd, along with all the rest, into those crowded days.

It was altogether a fragile thing, strung on nuances and overtones, Debussy rather than Bach. The Girl With the Flaxen Hair. She didn't take my working seriously.

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What could I earn—a few dollars for an afternoon's work? It was much better to go for drives along the lake or for a sail at the Yacht Club; sometimes we had lunch at her father's club where she signed the checks. Once I called for her at the Conservatory. There was an empty studio and I went in and played the piano while I was waiting. I lost myself for a while in the music. When I turned around she was there, her eyes very bright. Maybe it hadn't just happened. Maybe, unconsciously, I'd planned it that way. If I did, it had the desired effect.

"Why didn't you ever tell me you could play like that?" she said.

"Like what?"

She came over and kissed me and held my hand tightly and we made a date to meet in Paris after my concert there. It was very callow, and wonderful.

A few days later she asked me to a dance at the Opera Club on Saturday.

"Mother and Dad are going to the opera that night," she said. "They'll drop in afterward. I want you to meet them." I must have looked scared. "It's not going to be formal," she assured me. "Just dinner jacket."

I spoke to my father about it that evening. I didn't have much hope. Just a few months before my mother had badgered him into buying a grand piano for me. Things were not going well at the skirt factory; he was in hock now to the installment company for the next ten years and he went around the house looking green and harassed. Also

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it happened that Grandpa was having trouble with his newspaper stand just then. Competition had opened up across the street from him and was cutting into his business. A few days before, hoodlums had scattered his papers and scrawled *Kike* in luminous yellow paint over his stand. There were decidedly weightier matters for the family to be concerned about than a dinner jacket for me. But I was without a sense of proportion at the moment. I needed that dinner jacket. I had to have it. It was terribly important. I said I'd pay for it myself, I'd pay it off by working an extra afternoon a week. I said a lot of things. My father's voice was flat, with a kind of wry wonder at my *chutzpah*.

"Sure, sure," he said. "Dinner jackets yet. That's all I got to worry about."

Then I lied. I said I had an opportunity to play for some very important people at the Opera Club. My father looked trapped. My Uncle Ben walked into the kitchen and stood there with his bony hands pushed into the sagging pockets of his shabby blue bathrobe.

"Maybe we could manage it," my mother said pleadingly.

My father grew angry. "Sure. Maybe we could manage a Packard too. And a raccoon coat. Maybe I could split myself in half altogether." He turned to me and said, "You don't play with a suit. You play with your hands and your heart. So you'll play twice as good and they won't notice you haven't got a dinner jacket. . . . Stop looking at me

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already!" he burst out. "There's worse tragedies in the world than your dinner jacket."

Well, I should have known, I thought bitterly. Against the Gorgon faces of JEW and POOR, nothing fragile or precious could long survive. It was brought low again, the bright winging shape lying there in the kitchen, which had seen so many little deaths without requiem, without burial, and me never knowing where to turn with my despair and rage, because even then, seventeen, with a lot of things on my mind, a lot of confusion and darkness, I could see that my father hadn't stayed poor merely out of spite.

I was in my room next afternoon doing some harmony, bitterly. I hadn't told Mab yet that I couldn't take her to the dance. I couldn't bear to let go. I was still hoping for a clap of thunder and a faint acrid smell and a gentleman with an opera hat and a tail over one arm, standing before me and holding out a dinner jacket. He could have had my soul so fast it would have made his head swim.

Presently I was aware that Uncle Ben had come into the room. I didn't look up from my music. He was always coming in—to chew the rag, "if I wasn't busy." Well, I was busy. I had harmony to do and practicing to do and homework to do and shoes to sell on precious Saturday afternoons and I was tired and sore and hungry for life and hungry for sleep and thirsty for knowing, and for not knowing, and, in short, I was busy, too busy to talk, or to listen, I was too damned busy to live.

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"See if this'll fit you," I heard Uncle Ben say in his slightly husky, hesitant voice. "It's size thirty-eight. The guy said it ought to fit."

I looked up, surprised to see him in street clothes. Usually he hung around the house in his bathrobe all day, smoking, picking at his mandolin, or just sitting. I saw the box he was holding and the label: *Maurice L. Rothschild*. My throat closed up with a sudden dry hope. He put the box on the bed and flipped the lid off and there it was, the sleek, plump, shiny miracle.

"Try it on," he said, rubbing his nose in a nervous diffident way he had. "They'll alter it if it don't fit. But the guy said it ought to fit. I brought him one of your other jackets."

I saw it now, in the box, under the tux—my blue serge jacket with the glaze effect and the frayed sleeves. I hadn't missed it. For a moment I sat looking stupidly at the box, at Uncle Ben, then I came out of my trance, grabbed the dinner jacket and put it on. It fit. It fit as if it'd been made for me, to order. It was right up to the minute too, Opera Club or Union Club or Edgewater Beach or anywhere else, shaped slimly to the waist, with those thrusting lapels, shiny as a grackle's wing.

"Try the pants on," he said, "they may be a little long."

They were, an inch or so. Uncle Ben took a card out of his pocket. "This is the guy in the alteration department. He said they'll alter it while you wait. And they'll have the right kind of shirt and tie for you. It's all paid for."

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I was staring at myself in the glass. I couldn't believe it had happened. Uncle Ben must have misunderstood my expression and thought I was having an attack of scruples. "Don't worry." He grinned at me in the glass. "I didn't rob a bank."

I hadn't been thinking about that part of it at all, but now I felt I ought to have some qualms—or show some, at least. "I can't take this, Uncle Ben. Gee whiz, the way you're fixed—"

He shut me up, almost fiercely. "Don't be a goddamn chump. You got a chance to do yourself some good, with some important people—don't start with the 'maybe I oughtn't, maybe I shouldn't' stuff. Don't be like the rest of this family. Take. Take. Don't let them push you into a corner where you got to sit by and watch the parade. Take your hunk of talent and make something of yourself."

Well, it takes a bit of doing. You can't make something of yourself in this world and still have time for everything and everybody else. All the people who come clawing at you with their need, all the ghosts who tug at your sleeve on windy corners and stare at you out of sightless eyes from dark hallways. Remember me. Remember me. You've got to close a few doors, and windows, and stuff your fingers in your ears and think about the score, the score, and the option coming up and the Ascap rating and the reputation you've made that's only as secure as the box office on your last picture.

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"Darling," Eileen called. "You're sure now you won't mind my getting rid of all this stuff?"

I sat and stared at the musical notations in front of me. They were for a movie called *Lost Lady*. There had been several in my own life. Grace. Angela. Mab. . . . Her parents hadn't stopped in after all, that night of the dance. I never met them. They went to Europe that winter. Mab followed in the spring and stayed on at school in Switzerland. There were a couple of letters in which we tried to keep alive the little fiction of my Paris recital and our meeting afterward. Somewhere, unmarked, over the wide Atlantic, a shiny moment of nearness, of glamour we'd caught that day in the studio, went glimmering.

Thirty years. A generation. An era. It had turned the dinner jacket for which I'd lied into a dismal rag, a caricature of elegance. But it had left the lie intact, the guilt untarnished.

"Darling," Eileen called. "Please give me a hand with this."

I went out into the hall. She'd collected the litter in a huge carton. "Just this once," she said, "then I won't disturb you any more. I want to get it out of the way. . . ."

She handed me a ball of twine and I started to tie up the carton. "I think I'll send it to the Salvation Army," she said. "They can always use things." The dinner jacket was lying on top of the heap. "There's still time to change your mind about this," she said, taking hold of it. "I could have it

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cleaned, you know, and hang it away. We might have a costume thing to go to sometime—”

“Will you stop jabbering,” I said savagely. I yanked the jacket out of her hand and stuffed it into the carton. Then I felt rotten. I could never get any satisfaction out of losing my temper with Eileen. It was always like slapping a child.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “There’s been so much to-do about this stupid dinner jacket.” I kissed her. “There’s a smudge on your beautiful Gentile nose.”

She wiped it off. “You’re funny, you know? Sometimes I don’t understand you at all.”

“That’s because I’m an Oriental,” I said. “The minds of Orientals are inscrutable.” I pulled the cord tight on the carton and knotted it. “Have this picked up in the morning, will you? And let’s not talk about it any more.”

I didn’t sleep well that night. I was dancing with a slim girl in a room with colonnades draped in papier-mâché moss. The name OPERA CLUB hung over the place like the congealed ta-da of an overture. There was a smell of mingled gardenia and Pinaud in my nostrils and the music of “Whispering” in my throat and somewhere a tenor sax was soothing a child with the same tune. The music stopped and I was walking across the room to commandeer an ice. Then I was waiting in a foyer, beside a potted palm, tapping a cigarette against my thumbnail as if I’d been doing it all my life. Someone went by and jostled me, he turned to excuse himself and we smiled politely at each other—a couple of men in dinner jackets.

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I awoke. Something had nudged me awake, down there in the chilly vaults of the subconscious. I lay in the dark with an old sick feeling of guilt in the pit of my stomach.

After a while I got up and lit a cigarette. Eileen awoke. "What's the matter?" she said, sitting up.

"Nothing," I told her. "Go on back to sleep."

"Is it the score?"

"Yes, it's the score."

"Maybe you ought to put it aside for a few days," she suggested helpfully.

"I've got to have it finished in a few days."

"You'll have it," she said, covering a yawn. "You always do."

"Yeah," I said. "Old Faithful. With my Rachmaninoff file."

"Now you just want me to baby you a little." She yawned again, prettily. "You don't need Rachmaninoff. You don't need anybody. You're the best composer in Hollywood, and you know it."

She yawned again, snuggled into the pillow. I watched her for a moment as she rode out on a smooth sweet tide of sleep. Beautiful Eileen. No ragged claws dredged the silent seas of her repose, no horrid shapes, or shrieks, or sights unholy.

It was next morning that I started to cough. California climate is tricky for colds. In the East where I grew up, winter announced itself in advance with a hundred signs and portents. Even before the last fires had burned them-

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selves out among the elms and maples that lined our streets, the Gray Lady was already brooding over the chilling waters of the Bay, small boys were blowing on their hands, thinking about roasted chestnuts and Flexible Flyers, old people hammered on the radiators evenings and threatened their landlords with due process of law—and at the first sign of a snuffle Grandma Gottlieb had the hot tea and dried raspberries out, prepared for the worst. She was scared to death of colds.

In the City of Angels months slip by unnoticed, September into October into November. The stately chromo of Beverly Hills hangs unchanged in its shiny gilt frame. The golden girls and boys make lazy parabolas from the diving board at the Beverly Wilshire pool. In the yard the hummingbirds still dart in and out, twanging the delphinium like a lyre. Asters take the place of calendula, the avocados ripen, the whole world seems to be turning slowly, like a fatted calf, roasting pleasantly in the sun. It is simply preposterous to have a cold in such weather.

I moved into one of the spare bedrooms so I wouldn't keep Eileen awake with my coughing. I was worried. I didn't realize how much until I heard Eileen say, one evening, "Are you taking your temperature *again*?" I took the thermometer out of my mouth, feeling foolish. I'd been keeping track for several days. Generally it showed normal in the morning and rose a few points, to ninety-nine six or eight, toward evening. Uncle Ben's had worked that way too. The doctors called it "low-grade" fever—typical of

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treponema pallidum. I was sleeping badly, wrapped in a thin fuzz of semiconsciousness that would come apart at the slightest sound or movement, leave me drenched in perspiration. Night sweats, another telltale sign. I seemed all at once to have a great deal of information about T.B. at my finger tips, early symptoms, disguised symptoms, hereditary factors. . . . Uncle Ben, I realized now, had given me all the facts. He thought our family had a predisposition to T.B. and he used to worry about my trying to crowd everything in—music and school and work and dates—burning the candle “on both sides” as Grandma used to say.

I could keep busy days, drive my mind past the waiting shapes and voices, the waiting stillness. It was the nights I minded. There was the thin tatting of a mandolin that followed me through the fitful hours, a lonely sound stitching futilely at the borders of silence. I prowled around the house wishing someone had had the imagination to start an Insomniacs Anonymous service. Sometimes I'd tiptoe into the room where Eileen lay asleep, look down at her with an aching tenderness that embraced even her inability to carry a tune, aware at the same time that I wanted to shake her out of sleep and say, “Get up, damn it. You're my wife. I'm scared. You're supposed to do something about it, talk to me or something, not just lie there like a beautiful cabbage.”

Then I'd go back to my bed and listen to the centipedes put their shoes on interminably in the dark, watch the

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shapes Nothing makes on the ceiling. And somewhere between sleeping and waking Uncle Ben would be there, standing in the doorway of my room or sitting on the edge of the bed, his hands in the pockets of the shabby blue robe, his eyes too bright, his voice a little husky, saying, "Guess you're too tired to chew the rag, huh? Guess you want to hit the hay?" And then I would be running, running as, it seemed to me now strangely, I'd been running all my life.

I went to my doctor finally, convinced that I was going to die and determined, if that were the case, to take matters into my own hands. I'd no intention of lingering on interminably, "chasing," as T.B. patients say, moving from one little desert island to another, coughing myself to death.

The doctor thumped me fore and aft and shook his head. "Nothing here but a cold and frazzled nerves," he told me. He dismissed my fears about T.B. "You'll never die of T.B.," he assured me. "I may be able to fix you up with a little heart trouble in a few years if you go on this way. But no T.B. Sorry." He sat back and looked me over with indulgent disapproval. "Where's the fire?"

He'd just handed me a reprieve from death and I was faintly irritated with him. "I'm not a doctor," I said sourly. "I haven't got an army of bugs working overtime for me. It's just me and my little hatchet. I've got to keep chopping all the time."

"Don't fool yourself," he said. "I could kill myself working, too. Did you have to have a new house?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

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"Nothing. Has it got a yard?"

"Sure it's got a yard. What are you getting at?"

"You wouldn't consider keeping a couple of goats, I suppose?" My doctor fancies himself a wit. He laughed at his own joke and then said, "Got any avocados?"

"Yes, I've got avocados," I said curtly. "I've also got a job I've got to get back to."

"All right," he said. "What do you want from me? You want me to give you some medicine to play with?"

"Look here," I burst out. "When somebody comes to me for music for a picture I don't ask them what kind they want. I look at the picture and I write it. You're the doctor. You're supposed to tell me what to do."

"You won't do what I tell you to do," he said quietly. "My prescription is no more pictures, no studios, fewer compositions—better ones—the kind you really like to do. Also fewer bills, more concerts—shall I go on?"

"Never mind," I said. "You doctors are all alike. You read from the book. Concerts. Where are you going to hear concerts in this town?"

"This isn't the only town in America. Go to New York. What are you doing here anyway? Is this a place for a musician, a composer, to live? Pictures." He almost spat. "Pictures!"

I got into my car after I left him and drove into the hills, looking for a place on Mulholland Drive. I'd got my first view of the town from there, my first Sunday in Hollywood. I hadn't been up there in years. I remembered the

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exquisite sense of proprietorship with which I'd first looked down at the white stucco tucked frostily into the dark green folds of the hills, like Christmas tree snow, all the spectacular, improbable city curled up, mindless, soulless and pretty as a white kitten against the jeweled shoulder of the sea. It had all belonged to me that day, as it never belonged to me afterward. There was a contract in my pocket for more money than Mozart had made in his whole life. And that was just the beginning. Some day, all in good time, I'd own one of those fine houses nestling proudly in the hills, with a pool and tennis court and lovely, long-legged ladies drifting about in the yellow glow of tall candles.

Now I had the house, and the pool, and a lovely, long-legged lady all to myself. I'd done what Uncle Ben had wanted me to do. I'd taken my hunk of talent and made something of myself. If only he could be here to see now. If only Grandpa or Grandma could be here to see. Or my Pa. If only one of them could be here to see.

I stopped the car at the top of the hill and got out. There it was, rolling away at my feet, unchanged, fairyland, the sun still shining, the sea still jeweled, the white stucco gleaming frostily like the sugar on the witch's house in *Hansel and Gretel* . . . and the procession of days moving by down there, blue and shiny, like beads on a dime-store necklace.

Suddenly, desperately, I wanted to be back in that sprawling gloomy house in Chicago, I wanted to be back

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with sweat and ache and stumbling hunger, with a little old man who sold newspapers for a living, whom life had shunted off onto a windy corner at Harper and 63rd where he blew on his fingers and made change for a nickel and proclaimed that life was great and good. With my Pa, who'd worked twelve hours a day in a shop to pay the installments on a piano for me, and my Ma, who'd stayed up nights figuring how to make it work, how to get the stuff for five cents less so it would come out even at the end of the week. To people, people dreaming and longing and hoping and going down—to my Uncle Ben and his ruined life and his dream of a good life for me.

A child's judgments are formed on criteria that fall away from him with childhood itself so that I can no longer say why Uncle Ben seemed of a different breed to me than my other uncles. I liked them too: Uncle Phil, who was loud and coarse but goodhearted and comical; Uncle Mark, my chocolate uncle, because he always brought me candy bars; Uncle Alf, who was dopey but could always be counted on for a pat on the head and a quarter. But it was Uncle Ben whose comings brought the sun and whose departures made a kind of darkness I can remember now—a sudden desolation. I remember his voice, from way back, soft and reassuring and a little husky; he was always clearing his throat even before the coughing started.

When I got to be five and six and could see him more clearly as against other men, he didn't seem quite so tall or

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godlike but he was still the best of the lot. The games he played were always the best games, the stories he told had always the most wonderful haunting overtones, the penny gifts he brought were always closest to the exciting deep heart of treasure.

By the time I was six he had done a hitch in the Army. Those were the days when flying fishes played from Rangoon to Mandalay and the dawn came up like thunder every time an Irish tenor rose to his feet. The Yellow Peril was a circulation builder for the Hearst papers and joining the Army wasn't considered patriotic. It was just a more refined way of being a bum. That was how the family thought of it, at any rate. For myself, I had a smeary photo postcard Uncle Ben sent me from Manila. He was dressed in khaki with a Sam Browne belt and the medallion from a sack of Bull Durham dangling from the pocket of his shirt and a Filipino girl looking on enigmatically from the sidelines. I suppose it wasn't an impressive photo, now that I think of it. But I was about four then and he didn't look like a bum to me. He looked like a hero.

In 1916 there was some trouble with Mexico and Uncle Ben's company was shipped there. It got there early in 1917. He was on a transport bound for Europe when the Armistice was signed. That's how it was with Uncle Ben. He was always too early or too late, or he never got there at all.

I can only guess at how he came to join the Army in the first place. He was of that rootless breed, I suppose, who seem doomed to rattle around in their environment like dry

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peas in a pod. Sometimes they transmute the wry sounds of their disharmony into music of mysterious beauty and power, and the world which hates the way they live, despises everything they are and stand for, comes at last to bow down and pay homage. Uncle Ben's art, alas, wasn't of that sort. It was the plaintive tinkling of his mandolin, the imaginative, tender stories he told, the charming sketches he drew for me, odd little figures and designs and doings not of this earth. They delighted and enthralled me but they weren't the sort of thing you could take to the market place and barter for bread and cheese, let alone fame.

By the time he was twenty he'd had, and lost, a dozen jobs. He couldn't seem to make good at anything. No push—I imagine that was his main difficulty. He had other qualities that might have been turned to good account if he'd been able to keep on at school past the eighth grade. I think he would have made a fine teacher, or a research chemist, or biologist—anything that required intelligence and patience and dedication—and no push. But however that may be, it couldn't be managed. He was the oldest, next to my mother; he had to help out, to keep the family going. The boys who came after him got a better break in that respect, though none of them ever did anything particularly with his schooling. Uncle Ben never complained that I know of. But I think it remained in his mind afterward as the place where he'd got sidetracked. He used to hammer away at me, years later, about the importance of an education. "Knowing" something. Odd. He knew so much, actually.

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I can see him, standing in front of a recruiting poster between job number X and X plus one, feeling his life suddenly foursquare around him like a prison courtyard and wanting, suddenly and unreasoningly, to run, before the gates swung shut on him forever. From the beginning it had required only a tiny operation—a quarter turn, so to speak—from some fictive gleam shining in his eye, for him to take his place beside the other white mice and grow resigned and comfortable, after a fashion, and safe, in a manner of speaking. And even, after a time perhaps, a little scornful of the feckless ones who spend their days with their elbows on the parapet, dreaming, and their nights reaching for fireflies.

But somehow he'd never managed that little death and transfiguration. And there on the poster before him was the gleam. The Philippines, Hawaii, the Orient. Maybe he'd find it in the faces there, see it in the temples or the far hills. Maybe he'd be walking along on a street in Siam or Shanghai, and look down, and there it would be, shining on the back of his own hands.

He was gone for three years the first time, then he came back and floundered about for a year or so, then he joined up again. This time he stayed seven years. He got to be a sergeant before he was mustered out. That seems strange too—thinking of Uncle Ben and Sergeant Quirt, for example, in the same space-time dimension.

I was thirteen when he came back that second time. We were living in Chicago then and my Brooklyn childhood

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seemed very far away, part of another life. I remember now an afternoon when I came back from school to the flat which was home in those days, which we shared with Grandpa and Grandma Gottlieb. I remember my mother meeting me at the door with a certain kind of smile on her face to tell me there was someone in the parlor who was very anxious to see me. A visitor. She wouldn't say who it was, only that it was someone I hadn't seen in a long time. I wasn't thrilled. Ever since we'd moved to Chicago, the year before, I'd been thumbed by relatives in that parlor, from Grandma down, till I was dog-eared. I had a vision of some ancient relic of maybe thirty or more who would fold me in a moist embrace and exclaim stupidly on how much I'd grown in the last few years, as if relieved I hadn't remained a dwarf or something, and remind me, with senile rapture, how cute and chubby I'd looked in diapers. I loathed that kind of talk. In those days I was trying hard to believe it hadn't really happened that way with me at all, that I'd just stepped ready-made, like Minerva's brother, from the forehead of Jove.

I tossed my books in the closet, and instead of going into the parlor, went into the bathroom and stood there for a while studying my face, with longing and disgust—Ramon Navarro was the man in those days—and then I went into the kitchen and took a glass of milk and a piece of devil's food cake to refresh myself from my labors, and I was standing there thinking about the ways of the world and

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the kind of life people had to put up with these days, with relatives and all, when I heard someone say, "Hi. How's the cake?"

I hadn't dreamed who it would be. I'd forgotten a lot in seven years, but that low husky voice was still instantly recognizable and still able to bring the blood singing into my head. I swung around expecting— How can I say what I was expecting? A knight in armor? A composite of Sir Gawaine and Jesse James and Ulysses S. Grant? Some kind of godlike being, with a mysterious radiance hanging over him? What I saw was a thin man, narrow-chested, with a shock of dull black hair over a plain sallow face, and a kind of fumbling manner and a slow deprecating smile.

It was Uncle Ben—and it wasn't. My mother said his name, with that same expectant smile; she remembered very well how I'd used to paste myself against him in the old days, how I'd cried for him in the first months of his absence. Something inside me was remembering it too, and making some claim on me, on my memory and my loyalty, but the rest of me was trying passionately to deny it, for the bitter truth is that I was ashamed of him, and of myself, and of the whole miserable, cheating world.

I gave him a forced, unnatural handshake and he put an arm around my shoulder, tentatively, because I imagine he was embarrassed too, he always was I guess, for being alive at all. I couldn't look directly at him. I knew he was waiting for something from me, a word, a smile of welcome, an embrace, but I couldn't do anything but stand there,

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rigid, frozen, kind of dying inside with shame and embarrassment.

I hung around the fringe of the family group that day listening to the talk, feeling strangely sullen and put upon, which is a way people have when they're conscious of having hurt or failed someone they care about. The talk didn't help. Maybe if he'd had some exciting things to tell about his experiences I might have got around to forgiving him for not looking like Ronald Colman or Daniel Boone. He'd been in the Philippines and he might have talked, for instance, about the Moros who bound themselves up with innumerable thongs, like tourniquets, before running amok, so that they had to be literally hacked to pieces before they could be stopped. Even I knew that, a kid who'd never been west of Chicago. But Uncle Ben might have never been anywhere for all he had to say about his adventures.

I can understand now. He'd been in a lot of places and maybe things had happened to him that are called adventure. But it wasn't adventure he'd been after, nor a Burton Holmes travelogue with which to entertain the homefolks. Nor was it even the much-vaunted fellowship of soldiering. He'd been looking for a lost gleam on a road somewhere and he hadn't found it. Wherever he'd gone it was always people he'd found, differently shaped or colored, differently clothed, speaking different tongues—but always the same little people somehow, wearing their lives away in drudgery without promise and without end, eating more or less regularly, spending themselves now and again, merci-

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fully, in love, playing at God every once in a while with dice or cards or curiously figured pieces of ivory, staring at the stars a little—and in the end he must have seen that they were searching his face as anxiously as he was looking into theirs, hoping too, no doubt, that they might find there the answer, the nameless something he had been promised when he'd been given a name and a consciousness and had looked for, ever afterward, in vain.

So he sat there in the parlor, talking in that quiet, deprecatory way about everything but himself, asking a lot of questions about the family and what had been going on, as if he thought maybe he'd really missed something while he was away. He made a couple of attempts to draw me into the conversation; he told some jokes and limericks and conundrums—a farmer has six cows and nine sons, you know the sort of thing—I imagine he'd been collecting them for just this occasion. But they didn't come off somehow. That curious shadow of discomfort was between us, falling like a pall over the very words we tried to use with each other.

No doubt he must have been disappointed in me too. I wasn't the boy he remembered, either. Maybe there was a shiny thread or two still left from the radiant, irreplaceable stuff of childhood for which there is no price and no market. The rest had already been worked over into more serviceable material. All unknowing, I'd been stripped of a lot of useless baggage and a set of new, streamlined values had been substituted. Some of that I'd done myself, with my little hatchet. But I'd had help too, all the help I needed,

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from the teachers and the people who write the approved books and the good citizens of the councils and committees who approve them. That's why I knew better now how to appraise the gentle, halting, ineffectual Uncle Ben I'd once loved so much. I was being readied for the market place; already I had a pretty good idea of what would go there and what wouldn't.

During the next couple of years I was aware of Uncle Ben's existence but at secondhand, like something you read about in the newspapers. I knew he had trouble getting "located." He went to New York, worked with Uncle Mark for a while in his furniture store, then tried canvassing house to house with a line of household appliances. I can't even visualize him at that job, ringing the doorbell of a stranger's house, intruding, to sell him something.

He returned to Chicago, where there was supposed to be more opportunity. And sure enough, opportunity rode up, like a galloping horseman out of the plains. He got a job in the draughting department of Westinghouse Electric at eighteen dollars a week. Some time after that he married. Her name was Edna Mittelman, she was a distant relative and I think it was my mother's idea to get her and Uncle Ben together. Marriage, she thought, would be good for him, give him an incentive to make something of himself. Making something of yourself—that was always the big goal, and the big problem.

I couldn't see, myself, what there was about Edna to give one an incentive. She was just another female, not

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young, not pretty, without any visible charm or distinction. If there was anything lovely about her it was some shy, lurking thing not visible to my naked, and incurious, eye. But perhaps beauty is a response to one's need as much as to his perceptions, which would be a great dispensation if true, since God's inspirations seem as hard come by as those of his bedeviled children. There are few enough masterpieces of women around and by the time the movie producers and the tycoons have picked them over there's precious little left for the ordinary male to choose from.

In any case, I'm ready to believe that Uncle Ben saw in Edna whatever it is that makes a man write poetry and dream dreams and think that having this woman around to feed and pay bills for and remind him regularly of his inadequacies is just what he needs to make him feel less lonely and dissatisfied.

I'm sure he was prepared to love Edna in his own inarticulate, fumbling way, and to cherish her too, if that were possible on eighteen dollars a week. It's a pity it wasn't enough—neither the money, nor the will, nor the need. Maybe it was all right for a while, the few months that they set up housekeeping in Chicago and Edna kept on at her job. They had a little furnished apartment on the South Side, with a set of blue and white crockery jars labeled *Sugar, Cloves, White Pepper, All Spice* that my mother gave them, and a folding bed that came with the apartment, and on their combined salaries they made out all right and

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could even take in a picture show once in a while. I think maybe he was happy for a few months, and hopeful. I'd like to think so.

After a few months the department Uncle Ben worked in at Westinghouse was moved to Pittsburgh. He had a choice of moving too or finding himself another job. He took the line of least resistance and moved. I saw him there, once, a couple of years later. I'd been east for the summer, working as a music counselor in a summer camp in the Berkshires. In those days, if you broke the train trip from New York to Chicago at some halfway point, like Pittsburgh on the Pennsylvania, or Buffalo on the Central, you saved nine dollars in fare. It gave me an opportunity to visit Uncle Ben, as my mother had asked me to do.

Sandburg has a poem called "The Sins of Kalamazoo." The sins of Pittsburgh are something too, as I recall. Where Uncle Ben lived, and how, had especial impact on me at the time because of the way I was feeling. I'd spent the summer in an enchanted glade which was only incidentally a summer camp for the sons and daughters of prosperous New York merchants. I had my duties to discharge but they also were incidental to what was really going on with me. There was a wood nymph on the premises, masquerading as a waitress. She was Italian, a blond Italian named Angela. She was devout, she smelled like musk roses, or what I imagine musk roses smell like; she had the eyes of a daydreaming child and a heart full of wildness and deceit. She was en-

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gaged to someone in Passaic, New Jersey, I remember, and her sweetheart would kill us if he knew what was going on—so she said—and that went for her father too, and her brothers and six or eight uncles.

All that summer they haunted my dreams, that gang, like an informal Mafia society, each with a terrible black mustache and a stiletto. And I was scared all the time and bewitched and drunk with discovery. I had made my plans as the summer burned away: come what might I was going to take Angela away, fly away with her, I'd no idea where, or how, but fly we would. And then on Labor Day her boy friend came up from Passaic, very natty in the uniform of a state trooper and much too chunky to fly anywhere. But he picked Angela up and set her on the back of his motorcycle and she rode off with him, with her cardboard suitcase and her beads and her Madonna face and her scent like musk roses—and with never a backward look. Long before, a lady named Grace had done that to me and broken my heart and now it had happened again and this time it was finished, it would never again be mended.

And so, all the long, clattery, dreary train ride from New York, I was filled with anguish and the memory of a music of the senses that Ronald Colman and Ramon Navarro no doubt heard all the time, for breakfast, lunch and dinner, but which I was sure I'd never hear again, not on this earth.

That's how it was with me on the late September day when I stopped in Pittsburgh, to save nine dollars and visit Uncle Ben and Edna, on my mother's orders. There was an

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indescribable taste of train in my mouth and a composite of Industry's horrors in my eye. I suppose there are rich people who live in Pittsburgh too, those who own and manage the great belching smokestacks and furnaces; they must have gracious houses with lawns and gardens somewhere. But I didn't see any of them that day. Uncle Ben met me at the station. We took two streetcars, I remember, to get to his place. He was strained and ill at ease, and curiously stiff in his references to the family. He looked pretty bad by then, pretty seedy. If I'd had any sense at all I'd have spared him the little conducted tour of his sorry home, his empty life, his barren defeat. I'd have gone to a hotel, I'd have asked him and Edna to come down and have dinner with me. Though probably Edna wouldn't have come. She was pregnant and seemed very self-conscious about it, and a little resentful, too.

The meal was a pretty ghastly affair. Edna was no cook. I wanted to leave afterward and go to a hotel, or maybe take a late train, but by then it was a point of honor with Uncle Ben, I imagine, to put me up for the night. I tried to figure out where I was supposed to sleep. It was a three-room flat, bedroom, kitchen and living room, on a court. I don't know what else to say about it. The rooms were small and there wasn't much furniture and what there was, was hideous. Uncle Ben fixed me up for the night on a rickety davenport in the living room with a lumpy blanket. It was the only extra blanket in the house, I guess, so the window stayed closed and it got unbearably hot and stuffy as the

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sleepless hours went by. I don't know why I didn't get up and open a window. But I didn't. I lay there, looking at the ugly bulky shapes of the furniture in the dark, listening to the taut whispering in the next room, hearing Uncle Ben cough now and again.

The morning was gray. It seeped up out of the dark, composed of smoke and dead hopes. Uncle Ben got up at six thirty but I was up and dressed before him. I didn't stay for breakfast. I made some excuse about an early train and left. I was walking when I left the house. I kept walking away from it, but inside I was running, running as fast as ever I could.

I don't know if Uncle Ben knew by then how sick he was. The family learned about it some time later. I remember the day my mother came home to say that Edna was taking the baby to her parents' home in Wisconsin and that Uncle Ben was going to a T.B. hospital in Denver. It was a shocker. I had a date to go to the movies that night and I almost didn't go, thinking of Uncle Ben with the shadow of death over him. It gave him, momentarily at least, a new value, or rather an old one. There was a little sinking at the pit of my stomach, something like the way I'd felt the first few months after he'd gone away to the Philippines.

During the next couple of years he was "chasing," as T.B. sufferers phrase it, with the wry gallantry of the very ill. He was in the hospital at Denver for about a year, then in Saranac for a while. Then he came to the house in Chicago to stay for a couple of weeks. The weeks lengthened

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into months. I think he'd given up the idea by then that he was ever going to get well. He didn't really need the persuasions my mother and grandma used on him to stay on. Edna had divorced him by then and he just wanted to be with the family, warm himself by the fire while he could.

The parlor window of our big sprawling flat faced out on the Midway and the campus beyond. He used to stand there by the hour, in his shabby blue robe, looking out at the turrets of Harper, thinking no doubt of the education he hadn't had, that he set such store by. It was funny. He knew so much, actually. He knew more about astronomy and biology than most college graduates. His head was full of all kinds of curious—and commercially useless—information. None of it meant anything to him. He thought himself ignorant and was always apologizing for it.

But with me, it was going to be different. I was going to amount to something, get somewhere. I was the shining light in the family, with my music and my books of poetry, T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. . . . "What's new on the literary front?" he would say with a teasing grin but the admiration, the ungrudging envy, were there, naked in his eyes. He would take the slim volumes from my hand and read a bit and then hand them back, shaking his head. "Boy, that's deep stuff. It's over my head." Sometimes when I was practicing the piano I would feel his presence and turn with a little involuntary grimace of irritation, to find him standing with his hands dug into the pockets of his bathrobe, watching me with his eyes tranced and immediately

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apologetic. "Don't let me disturb you, kid. That's Beethoven, huh? What gets me—how do your fingers know where to go?"

His own fingers knew where to go, with a pencil in them and a sketch pad before him. I wish I'd been able to tell him, just once, what I'm thinking now. That if anyone had set me on an island, alone somewhere, with my volumes and my music and all the education I was getting in those halls of learning he looked at with such longing, I'd have been dead in a week, raving and slobbering in the dark. But he could have been set down with just a coil of wire and when they found him a year later, I warrant he'd have been equipped with decent living quarters, a radio and maybe a Swiss movement watch. He could fix anything. He could make anything. He was an expert draughtsman. Among the sketches he left were designs of automobiles that completely adumbrated the look they were going to have twenty years later. The turtle shape, the boatlike fins, the fenders that go over the whole wheel. Like everything else about him, his timing was off and I can imagine that Edna must have regarded his wasting his leisure with these things as just another evidence of his maddening impracticality, a kind of willful self-indulgence on his part, when he might have spent those precious hours making something of himself for his family. Funny. So many men who know nothing and can do nothing but persuade people to buy things they don't need, grow plump and sleek in this world. And he who knew so much and felt so much

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couldn't make a life for himself, out of all he knew and felt and dreamed, because of what he thought he didn't know.

He was at the window in the parlor when I came in, the night of the Opera Club dance. He'd waited up for me.

"Uncle Ben," I whispered harshly into the gloom that always smelled a little of old damp plaster. "What're you doing up?" It was after four. He looked terrible. "You shouldn't be up."

"I wanted to find out how you made out," he said. He followed me into my room. "Did you give them a run for their money?"

He laughed and started to cough at the same time. I stood uncomfortably, holding the jacket I'd just taken off. I'd had a wonderful time but it was all a little blurred now. Already it was a little difficult to believe that it had ever seemed so terribly, desperately important for me to have a dinner jacket. I hung it on the back of a chair.

Uncle Ben straightened up from coughing, stuffed his handkerchief back in his bathrobe pocket. He didn't mean had I played well. What he'd meant was, what kind of people were they? Were they just rich or were they really interested in music? Could they maybe fix up an audition for me with the Symphony, or sponsor a recital for me, or something like that?

"They're all right," I said. "I'll tell you about it tomorrow." I started pulling off my clothes. I'd deal with my conscience tomorrow too.

"Yeah," Uncle Ben said, "you must be all in. You go

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ahead and hit the hay. I'll just finish this cigarette." He sat down on the bed.

"You oughtn't smoke," I told him dutifully.

"I know." He grinned a little. "I'm liable to stunt my growth."

I threw my clothes on the chair and got into bed without washing or anything. I was dying for sleep.

"You ought to watch yourself, too, you know," Uncle Ben said. "This four o'clock stuff is O.K. once in a while. But don't make a habit of it. You don't get away with it. You only think you do."

I grunted and turned on my side.

"How was the tux?" he asked. "I'll bet you looked O.K. in it, huh? Good as any of them?"

"Yeah," I said sleepily. "Swell."

"Guess it must be a pretty swell place, that Opera Club, huh?"

"Mmm," I said. My eyes were clotting with sleep. He said something else I didn't hear. His voice went off into a kind of drone and I wanted to brush it away, like mosquitoes. Then I heard his cough and started awake. I saw his too-bright eyes, his too-thin face. He stood up, pinching the end of his cigarette. He dropped the butt in his bathrobe pocket.

"Guess you want to hit the hay," he said.

"Yeah," I said, "I'm dead. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow, Uncle Ben." My eyes closed and sleep welled up around me like a tide. Just before I was swept out to sea I

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felt something, a light touch around my shoulders. I jerked awake again and saw him standing over me. I realized, fuzzily, that he'd tucked the blanket in around my shoulders. It made me feel trapped, hemmed in, and I wriggled free, pushing the blanket down. He was embarrassed that I'd caught him doing it; he coughed moistly, said something about "Army style" and went out quickly.

I suppose that for a moment, looking down at me asleep, he'd forgotten the wonders time had wrought. I was a kid again, the kid he'd used to bring penny gifts to and tell stories to and make little sketches for—drawings of creatures who weren't of this earth, or any other, gentle, kind, without urgencies, and without cruelties, sketches that had no commercial value whatever, only wonder and magic for a child. For a moment, as he looked down at me, I must have been that dumb kid again, untaught by the world's lore and the world's needs, who'd accepted him, thought he was fine, complete just as he was—thought indeed that he was someone down from heaven. He'd tucked the blanket around my naked shoulders and I'd pushed it away. And for just a moment, after he'd gone out, I felt a little wrenching, deep inside, thinking of that lonely ship he was on now, floating slowly, irrevocably, out to death.

And then I turned my face into the pillow and sank into sleep.

He died a few months later. He rented a room at the Morrison Hotel and shot himself with an old service revolver he'd kept from the hitch he did in the Army. There

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wasn't anything theatrical about it. It seemed rather fine to me, the way Army people do it when they've come to a place from which there's no turning. He left a note, saying he'd "chased" as long as he could. But there was no point in it any more, eating up money, being a burden to himself and everyone else. He wasn't ever going to get well and there was no use kidding about it any longer. He wanted the family to know that he hadn't been unhappy at the end. Particularly he wanted me to know that he felt good about having done something useful at least once in his life. He knew I would understand. There was an informal little testament added to the note, saying how he wanted his few effects disposed of. He had some books he wanted sent back to the sanitarium he'd stayed at in Denver. His mandolin went to a kid on the block who used to come in afternoons after school and listen to him play.

It was very clean somehow, in a bare quiet way, like the rooms I imagine he'd lived in the last few years of his life, with his shoes standing together under the bed and his socks put away and his shirt hung up in the closet. It's silly to say we were glad about it. But we did have a feeling, I think, that somehow he'd done better at this than he'd ever been able to do about living. All of us, I should say, except Grandma. She couldn't understand why he'd had to do it. If only he'd tried a little harder, a little longer, she cried inconsolably, if only he'd gone on taking care of himself, drinking more milk. . . .

She was upset too, of course, that Uncle Ben couldn't be

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buried in hallowed ground, being a suicide. She pleaded with the rabbi. He was sympathetic but adamant. There was no way. The judgment of the Lord is absolute. The path of righteousness is strait.

What Grandma never knew, because it was arranged that she shouldn't, was that Uncle Ben couldn't be buried at all. He'd sold his body to the Institute for Tubercular Research, for fifty dollars, to buy me a dinner jacket.

So it is spring once more and a lady in a blue smock has put a geranium out on her window sill. All day she has been tending it as if its well-being contained a magic portent for her own life. It is growing dark but she puts no light on in her apartment. No doubt dusk suits her mood. She will hug it to herself for another hour or so until the need for a drink overcomes her reluctance to emerge from its protective embrace. Then with a click of a switch she will light a thousand candles and face herself in the mirror, aghast; she will mix a drink hurriedly and then perhaps she will do something brazen and rash with her address book and the telephone. Or perhaps she will have another drink, and another, and fall asleep on the sofa finally, with her thighs tightly closed against the merciless thrusts of memory and desire.

And I too am reluctant to leave the shelter of remembered rooms I've evoked, filled with the homely bric-a-brac of family doings; the noisy, vivid dark of Brooklyn streets; the sawing silences of Catskill nights . . . myself

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going down the shadowy weeks and years of a dream, poring over books and music, hunched over coffee and doughnuts in one-arm cafeterias, hurrying across the Midway in the dissolving yellowing gray of before morning; my face glimpsed, with a sense of strangeness, in mirrors, or in the black shine of a piano, wan with the liverish pallor of gobbled food and insufficient sleep, yet lit by something luminous within, like some Argo set ablaze by the intensity of its quest.

What golden fleece was I seeking, what prize—on this journey of some fourteen thousand two hundred and twenty-two days, not counting many excursions, side trips, resolves and betrayals, together with innumerable haircuts, shoeshines and lies? Was it this final enigma of a warped little flower shape on a window ledge across the way? Perhaps the answer *is* there. Perhaps the meaning of my quest is that I should now continue it just a little further, as far as the door of my neighbor across the street, who is lonely.

Suppose I should present myself and confess to her that I too am lonely, wanting until now to be so, cutting myself off from strangers who went by the names of loved ones, to live with loved ones who go forever by the names of departed ghosts. Now I have assembled them and somehow it is they, their joined voices, that bid me go and ring my neighbor's doorbell and say: Sister—of Miriam, of Naomi, of Mab, of Grace—how is it with you? I have felt your loneliness reaching out to me all these winter months and have done nothing about it. Why? Because I am cold-

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hearted and indifferent? Or because I am a man without a country, a Jew who doesn't speak Jewish, a composer without a note to my name? Now suddenly it seems important that we should speak, converse—more important than whether you are snobbish and I am shy, or vice versa, whether you are Jew or Christian, Parsee or Puritan—because what I seem to perceive from this day of troubled recollection is that our proper concern with each other on this earth is not what we are but how we are—healthy or ill, happy or sad, empty or filled.

Maybe (I might say to her) you will be so kind as to make me a cup of tea, and serve it to me in a glass with a piece of lump sugar? And I will show you how my grandfather and my grandfather's grandfather drank their *tchai*, holding the glasses cradled in their hands, thus, for a little warmth, sucking the fragrant liquid through the bitten sugar for a little sweetness, between running and running for their lives. And maybe you will tell me about your ancestors, whoever they are, or anything else that pleases you to talk about—geraniums, the state of the world, the flight of wild geese or the dollar, the meaning of life, the population explosion, the merits of Beaujolais over Medoc, the nature of godliness. Whatever our topic, let us sit together for an hour of warmth and comradeship, we who are so fearfully and wonderfully made, forgetting that by long tradition I am supposed to use all my resources to push you into bed and you yours to wrap a halter around my neck. This we know—the recurring miracle of spring has shaken

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us a little but it will soon leave us again, unchanged, to resume our practiced ways, collecting the things which possess us, nurturing the hatreds that destroy us, gathering the stones and spittle we will require for the next inevitable judgment. We can be sure that against all disturbing intimations of immortality, all distractions of wonder and beauty, our need to possess and stifle each other, to use and betray each other, to judge, to condemn, to strike down, to spit on each other, will remain undiminished, forever part of our mysterious, profane destiny on earth.

