

A BLUE MOON IN BROOKLYN



BY ALAN ROBBINS

Also by Alan Robbins

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Published by
Alan Robbins
575 West End Avenue Suite 9D
New York, NY 10024

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Bom buhuh bom,
Adang a dang dang,
A ding a dong ding...

Blue moon, you saw me standing alone.
Without a dream in my heart,
Without a love of my own...

The Marcells

CHAPTER ONE



Stars die.

Maybe I was listening when the teacher said that but more likely I had other things on my mind then. Girls, no doubt. I was obsessed with them. How they smelled, how they looked, how they dressed. What they thought of me. Those things were far more important to me then than ridiculous matters like the destiny of stars.

The future to me meant nothing further than the end of that rotten science class. After all, everything that mattered was right there before me in the form of boobs and butts. I had no time at all for nonsense like Ort clouds and spiral arms. Even less the death of stars.

Of course I was wrong about that.

In fact it matters very much that the vast twinkly tapestry overhead is nothing more than a smatter of flames that live and spark and die like embers. Like those subatomic particles called negatrons that vanish even before they are born. Null is the rule not the exception and even the mighty stars go out, leaving barely a trace. Whispers of lost wonders.

Just like us.

Inflamed in one instant, cold as dark matter in the next.

But all of that is dim futuresight. Back then, sitting in that musty classroom, I was still young and it was pure babble to me. Moments, lifetimes, eons, eternities... I was not ready to know about such things. I was fifteen and far too single-minded to think beyond my own little flibbet of being. A slim, smart, smirk of a fellow sitting at that desk over there, bored to tears by all things taught. Caring about the spots on the legs of the girl at the next desk far more than the spots on the sun that wobble the atmosphere and alter climates.

Nor was I in any position to ponder the strange things going on all around... nebulas and novas, starburn and starburst, and the creeping spinnets of lightness and blackness. Where such matters are concerned, you need a leap of thought. You need some depth in your brain. Stardeath happens so slowly that an entire species can evolve beneath it and still not notice. What can you expect from one horny teenager?

Then the girl, I think her name was Diane, tugged on her skirt and that was all that mattered. The way the material rolled over her chubby thighs and how the skin on her bent knee stretched to form a pale dimple. Mr. Necker, that fig of a teacher at the blackboard, droned on about stellar dust and the formation of atoms in the Big Bang as Diane twiddled curls of hair with one finger and with the other wrote

the name Ronnie over and over in her notebook with a heart dotting the i. The boy to the right etched diagrams of football plays on his desk with a dry ballpoint. The clock at the front of the room was stuck and never moved, proving an important truth...that while time slowed as you approached the speed of light, it stopped stone dead in a high school science class.

Sitting like a lump, half unconscious, even the burst of a dropped textbook behind me barely broke the spell. I looked out the window, winced in the sunlight and still failed to understand that that very sun was just another star, growing older by the minute. In a zillion zillion such minutes – in the twinkling of a star to be precise – it would begin to fade and fizzle.

Was already beginning to, in fact.

Then one day – phitz! – it too would flame out and vanish into the unavoidable void.

But then the bell sounded and the whole shebang from girlskin to starlife was swept away by the mad rush to the door.

The bathroom on the third floor of the building was a continuation of the theme – a hole in the fabric of space and time. Icky tiles, grungy floor, grimy metal booths...it was a primordial laboratory for the basic elements: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, smoke, sperm, spittle, scrunge.

I took the stall at the far end of the line; no lock, no seat, no flush, no paper, like all the others. But this one had a door and I used my copy of *The Odyssey* to wedge it shut. Then both standing and bending, legs straddling the bowl, pants hugging the knees and one hand on the divider for support, I did what I did and read the writing on the walls: Donna K. gives good head; Rico, You Suck; Rico Still Sucks; Want a good blow?; Who don't; You you Fag. Doctor Bumhole eats it; Broads eat it; Your abroad; No you are. Homer.

Homer? No, that was just the remaining letters of Homeroom sucks.

Then three loud jerks came tumbling into the bathroom and I perched on the seat so my legs could not be seen under the stall.

“Yo shit! Juicy dat fuckin broad. I mean, j’see her?”

“Goddamn!”

“Hey shuddup you pisshead. Act like a man, not a jerk okay?”

“What’s witchew?”

“Jimmy’s in L-U-V-E.”

“No but I’m serious Mel. Has she got unbearable knockers or what?”

“What.”

“You fuckin crazy man?”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you. What’s wrong withèem?”

“They’re too fuckin pointy’s what.”

“Get fucked.”

“They ain’t hers.”

“Of course they’re hers.”

“You know, right?”

“Fuckin bullshit I do. I bumped into her in the hall.”

“So what?”

“So they’re hers.”

“Dickwarden here wouldn’t know real tits if they bit him. They’re falsies jerk-head.”

“Yo, yo. Whatta we got here?”

Boxy feet on the other side of the stall door stopped short then this kid who resembled a fire hydrant slowly pushed it open.

“What the fuck are you?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” I said politely, coming down off the perch.

“Then what the fuck are you eardropping for?”

“I wasn’t.”

“Hey! Don’t wise off shithead,” the third one said, putting his foot up on the wall like a gate and blocking my escape.

“C’mere you,” Mel said.

He was standing at the mottled mirror, regrooving his hair with a long thin black comb. First one side, then the other, then back to the first. He seemed to really like what he saw.

“I’m late for my next class,” I said.

I was considering flushing myself to freedom through the city sewer system but I knew that none of the flushes flushed.

“He’s late for class,” the hydrant said, doing a bad imitation. “Now ain’t that too tough. How would you like to die and not have to fuckin worry about it?”

“C’mere a second,” Mel said. “I ain’t gonna hurt you. I only wanna axe you a question.”

“No, let’s *do* hurt’m.”

“Question?” I asked.

“About broads. You know about broads, right?”

“Yeah axe him.”

“You give the right answer and you get to class on time. You fuck up and we slice your dick off. That’s fair ain’t it?”

The third punk pushed me over to the sink and stood behind me in case my answer fell short.

“The question’s this. Do you know Barbara Zomex? You know her right?”

“I know *of* her,” I said.

Everybody did; she was a famous neighborhood skenk, which meant that she put out or at least had the reputation to.

“Lissen to him...he knows of her. What’re you, some kind of fuckhead? Mel, let me cut his worm off now and get it over with.”

Mel was still forming his pompadour as the other boy took out a pocket knife and began flipping it in the air. The third one was swinging from the stalls on one arm like a lesser ape.

“Now think carefully about your answer here,” Mel explained. “It’s life and

death we're talking."

"Yeah yours, shitmeat."

"Do you think that Barbara Zomex stuffs her bra?"

"Hey, y'leadin the victim."

"Shuddup. Or is those her own real tits? Hah?"

"Holy Crap! Looka dis," the monkeyboy said as he swung into the stall I had used. "S'fuckin guy f'got to flush. You dirty slob."

"The toilet's broken," I explained.

"Woudja lissen a this guy? D'toilet's broken! Let's give'm the fuckin ride."

"Let's stick his head in it!" the third one said brightly.

"No," Mel said, turning back to me. "Answer the question. Real tits or not?"

"You mean in school or on the weekend?" I asked, stalling.

"He's got a point there," Mel said.

"Yeah, on his fuckin head. I say we cut the red tape and teach'm a lesson."

"Let's kill the faggot. That'll teach him!"

Then a loud buzzer sounded and we all jumped, caught off guard by the way it echoed in the tiled room. It was only the late bell for the next class but I seized on it like a raft.

"FIRE!" I shouted.

"No shit!"

"Holy shit!"

"Bullshit!"

And as we vaudevilled our way out the door, I slipped into the crowds in the hallway.

Marasmus High School was the largest in the country at that time, bursting a student body of eight thousand. The halls between classes spilled over with teenagers, elbow to rib, toe to arch, nose to ear; an entire generation all wound up and set to go, following the yellow lines from room to room.

Just think of it...all those Neils and Roberts, Bonnies and Dianes, Richards and Arlenes. Every frumpy Phil, skinny Alan, gaunt Gail, shrimp of a Roberta, nice guy Ray, rotten Arnie, sexy Rhona, gritty Gloria. And Stan and Nancy, Frank and Carol, and Sheri and Linda who dyed her hair, round-faced Mary, David and Susan who got married too soon, and Helen, Martha, Ellen, Sara and Joel born to be bald.

And me too squeezed in between Harvey with the big teeth and Naomi with too much makeup, Donna with the freckles and all the Barbaras, the Lawrences, the Debbies, the Howards, the Marks, the Annettes, the Iras. All of them trudging this way and that, thinking, talking, planning, pushing; each one carrying a box of memories, a portfolio of dreams, looseleaf of notes on what to know. All those lives bound up in this certain place and time – Brooklyn in 1964 – and every single one of them the apex of a former generation's marchabout. Each base before them the apex of yet another and so on and so on all the way back to the first high school set up a few moments after the desperate leptons of the Big Bang were born.

I have heard it said that souls line up to take human form. There are lines to be ants or rats or philodendrons to be sure, but the line to become human is by far the longest. It stretches five times around eternity. It is a long, tiring, anxious wait but just the same there is great excitement all along the line. It seems that everyone is dying to be human again even though they can never quite say why. There is just nothing else like it, I guess. And so, despite the obvious drawbacks, the line never gets any shorter.

Marasmus was practice for that.

The endless wait, the pressing crowds, the momentum of all those hopes. The confusion, the churning, the teetering and tumbling. The sense of being flushed. Inane, disturbing, disorienting. But somehow worth it.

Like life.

That evening I waited for my friends on the corner of Church and Flatbush Avenues, near the school, the Old Dutch Reformed Church, Garfield's Cafeteria. It was the place you went to meet someone if you needed to but standing there alone could be risky. You might bump into a friend of your mother's who might embarrass you by telling how much you look like her. Or see your crazy Uncle Lou who wandered Flatbush like the nuthouse that he was warning people about radio waves. Some punk might see you alone there and decide to prove himself on your face. This was Brooklyn, after all, the broken nose of boroughs.

So I was relieved when the guys arrived: Vinnie with his biceps in the lead, Herbie with that matted hair behind him, then the Dinger tall and lean. They joined me under the light of the streetlamp and I instantly felt safer.

We said Ho's and Yo's and slapped palms in the official teen greeting of the day but Herbie slapped up when his palms were on the bottom which was wrong by street rules. The hands were supposed to be loose and cool with the fingers spread naturally in front of the pelvis. And the downward slap was slack, fingers falling into the receiving palms. You never looked at your hands but instead gazed off to the side. Slouch, slump, never jolt the shoulders.

The Dinger was right behind him and did it right, hands low enough given the fact that he was over six feet tall, and loose enough given the lifetime of back pain that I knew he would have later on. Vinnie came last, sauntering smoothly. Ah yes...Vinnie Vidivicci, although that is only the way I have chosen to remember his name. He was a muscular boy with a wide, flat nose that had been broken in a fall from a bike but never fixed. This masked any delicacy in his nature and gave a slightly brutish impression. For a sixteen-year-old boy in Brooklyn in that era it was the perfect front.

Maybe we looked like another bunch of punks to the old ladies that passed by but we were just four guys passing the time until life stepped in and passed it for us. Herbie who would marry his college sweetheart and move to Colorado to work in the forest service and the Dinger who would become a lawyer make a lot of money and Vinnie who would write children's books and live with a man for thirty years. And me, who never stopped worrying.

“What happened to you guys?” I asked.

“We had to take a slight detour,” the Dingler explained.

“The Rockets were out near Herbie’s house,” Vinnie added.

“We had to go all the fuckway up to Ocean to avoid them.”

“Shit.”

“Shit,” I agreed.

The Rockets were one of the few street gangs left in the neighborhood. Gangs, of course, began when New York began but they were going out of style by then. Times were changing and they were losing their ground to high school fraternities. Even the Dukes Of Earl had evolved into Phi Sigma Rho over the summer. But gangs died hard in Brooklyn, the great raw borough, home to teamsters and butchers. Brooklyn, where the switchblade knife was invented, the chainlink fence made, and each new immigrant group came to scramble its way into the American dream. And so by 1964, a few stalwarts from the Rockets or the Saints or the Flatbush Imperials still strutted down the avenue in their leather jackets and Garrison belts for one more year.

A giggle of girls passed, walking quickly, shoulders touching, hips ticking. Fanning their whispers from pale mouths, they radiated a kind of stumpy sexuality that I swooned in. One of them bent down on the church steps to tie a shoelace. She was not wearing any socks and I could see the doughy muscles of her ankles and the peachy skin creasing and curving over her instep, the bump of her anklebone. Her thumbs toyed with the brown shoestring and she winced as she caressed and twirled it, struggling with the knot. The shiny black shoes had scuffmarks near the toe.

I was trying to catch her with peery glances, planning to say something to her, hoping to possess her in that instant in some way. I wanted something from her but I could not make clear to myself what it was. Just sex and that alone? Maybe. Or maybe more. I was mulling over something to say that would not sound eager and vulgar and dumb all at the same time as the instant passed and the girl stood up and moved on around the corner.

The four of us began to walk down Flatbush with the black sky like a tent over the street. A few stars were out and I wondered if they twinkled due to shifting currents in the thick atmosphere of the earth as Necker claimed or because of nervous fidgeting, the not knowing what was coming next.

Flatbush was a wide street with lights and shadows everywhere, streams of cars parked and moving, people standing or strolling. The Dingler was asking me something but I was still thinking about that girl with the shoelace.

“Hey where the heller you?” he asked, poking me in the back.

“I’m what?” I jumped.

“He’s thinkin’ about Candy,” Herbie said.

“Shut up about Candy aready. You bugged me about her last night.”

“She’s your girlfriend, ain’t she?”

“Ain’t. I only met her at a couple of parties. And anyway she doesn’t even go

to Marasmus.”

“Think y’gonna go out wither?” the Dangler asked.

“Nope.”

“Why not?” he continued.

“Not my type,” I said.

“She so fuckin ugly, man. Ughly!” Herbie writhed.

“Shut up you clown.”

“She is.”

“She is not.”

“Is.”

“Herbert, you are a pinhead.”

“I’m tellin’ you she’s a dog. She’s got a big fat ass like a cow. And she’s dumpy too.”

“Fuck you you wart. Look who’s talking. And besides, she’s got a nice face. I meaner face’s nice, don’t you think Ding?”

“What’s the diff, y’not gonna marryer. Don’t pay any attention to Herbie here, he’s undergoing a metamorphosis.”

“Yeah, jerk to dickhead in one quick move.”

“Ech!! She’s so ugly. Coff-coff. Hup-BLAH!”

“Gimme a break willya? God a you an idiot.”

“I may be an idiot but I know what I like!”

“You think she’s ugly Vinnie?” I implored, trying to gather support.

“Leave me outta this.”

Vinnie was always the outsider, the loner, the cowboy. In a few years he would move to the West Village, live with an older woman for a while, write poetry, take mescaline. He was already much older than such silliness.

“Hack hack,” Herbie persisted. “She ain’t no Marlene Bazooms. Oo, Oo, Oo!”

“Well I can’t argue with you there.”

“Marlene Buzanth is a fuckin nine and a half,” Herbie swooned.

“Not ten?”

“Her front teether too big. Y’know what I mean? Like she’s got big buckteeth, y’know?”

“A perfectionist idiot!”

“I wouldn’t let Candy hold it for a minute while I take a piss.”

“Again with Candy!”

“Will you shuddup aready Herbie? I mean assuming she could find it.”

“Well I wouldn’t.”

“So who cares?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Stop saying that you asshole. Why do you keep saying that?”

“I’m saying it cause I’m saying it.”

“That’s good reasoning.”

“That’s right.”

“Aright, aright.”

“Aright aready.”

“Aright.”

In bed later that night I took out a letter I had gotten that day. It was a letter from Candy. Although I was not officially going out with her, as I told the guys, I had been hanging out with her. We met mostly at parties where we spent the time talking over the Supremes singing “Come See About Me,” the sound of dry heaves coming from the john, squeals in the bedroom, and a slurpy beer-chugging duel in the foyer.

She was short and a little pudgy, with a biggish nose and a vague clammy sweat. Not unattractive exactly but not the girl of my dreams either. She did not go to Maramus and did not even live in the neighborhood; nobody knew much about her, she was a friend’s friend. And all that made her seem even more unfamiliar.

But she was funny and smart and somewhere inside my spermatic brain I knew those to be attractive qualities. We had a lot in common; we did not like Burl Ives, did Odetta. Paul and Paula...the worst, the Kinks...the best. Liked Hermann Hesse, hated madras, 4-H clubs, and tuna fish casseroles. Pizza – like television – was a necessary evil. Lawrence of Arabia. The Defenders. The deaths of William Carlos Williams and Theodore Roethke, which I faked knowing about. Valerie Brumel jumping 20 inches over his own head, which she faked being interested in.

Then by some law of momentum rather than desire, I walked her home one night. In the hallway of her building out in Brighton, we kissed. I felt her oozy tongue on my palate, the warm wind from her nostrils gliding over my cheek. I rubbed her breast with my left hand as if shining the window to her lust and was aware of her tummy pressing against my crotch. When a muffled noise from inside the apartment reminded her that mommy and daddy were home she smiled and said “Smother time luv.”

Was that going out?

Maybe...but if it was, I did not want to admit it to myself. Candy was not the girl I had in mind when I thought of finally getting laid. Lucky for me, she had to go away on some kind of trip with her parents for a few weeks which gave me time to distance myself. She promised to write me the whole time, which sounded funny to me. But in fact, she did and that letter was the first of many she would send.

Hello puddin-head,

How’s things home on the range? In other words what’s cookin? This is not the letter I planned to mail that I told you about but I decided to write this one. I’m sort of miserable now but not especially.

Advance warning – I write horrible letters. This will probably end up being a questionnaire as first letters usually do, don’t be too surprised if I am always serious. Basically that is how I am (serious). I am completely egocentric. This has nothing to do with what I’m writing but I felt I should warn you. I’m not really, I don’t

think.

HI! It's tomorrow now, I mean tomorrow for me, maybe it's yesterday to you, oh well. The reason this looks somewhat shaky is because I had an oral speech test before we left and I am basically (besides serious) shy. But only when I don't know...oh forget it.

I'm afraid I do that alot. I start talking or writing about something and then I get sick of it. I even bore myself. I think I love you. Now in order to make this a nice long letter I'll ask some of the things that mean a lot to me. Actually that's not true I wish I was this verbose when writing stories. Anyway, have you ever read *The Family Of Man*, *Waiting For Godot*, *Babii Yar*? I'll send you a copy if you haven't. Do you like Jules Feiffer?

'Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.'

Emerson wrote that, do you like it? I think it's sharp, I had to think about it alot before I really understood it (I'm not really thick I just act that way. Ha!)

Do you know why I write 'Ha' after certain things? So you'll know when I'm kidding. Do you think I'm insane?

Candy

Babii Yar and Emerson? She was too smart for me, that much was clear. And not sexy enough; I knew that too. Yet she seemed to like me and that alone was a compelling reason to like her. And in any case, all it meant at the moment was reading a few letters so it was no big deal.

And puddin-head?

What the hell was that?

CHAPTER TWO



Mrs. Rose Read rose and took a stub of chalk daintily in her pinch, faced the class squarely. Erect as a totem, stern and stiff, pole-chested, she held her copy of *The Odyssey* in her left hand like a cosmetic mirror and enunciated another chapter from the book as though inhaling the text through her oblong nostrils. This was the authorized Normal School posture for reciting from Great Works Of Literature. As Read punctuated each phrase with airy pokes of the chalk, the rest of the class tittered, twitched, and squirmed. But Read merely firmed up her collarbones and pressed on.

“When the young dawn with fingertips of rose touched the world, I roused the men, gave orders to man the ships, cast off the mooring lines and filing in to sit beside the row locks...”

She paused classically to let the image sink in, then frowned at a few of the sleepyheads in the back, including me, before continuing.

“...oarsmen in line dipped oars into the grey sea...”

The casting off of the mooring lines she noted by a sharp slash in the air. The grey sea was marked by an odd tinkle of her fingers over imaginary waves. Her eyes, fixed on a distant star, returned briefly to earth to stifle some fidgeting in the prow. Then she took another wheezy breath.

“...so we moved out, sad in the vast offing...”

My head was bobbing as though steering the thin waterway between a daze and an outright blackout. As I made a jaw-popping yawn, bubbles of spit gurgled at the corners of my lips. One eye was closed and through the winky blur of the other I was focusing on Read’s osseous form at the far horizon. The dried spur of her head poked out of her black dress, the leathery skin of her hands held the tome.

“...having our precious lives, but not our friends.”

She concluded with a firm flap of the hardcover. Dreams burst throughout the rank and file, pencils dropped, limp heads snapped, numb arms fell into startled laps. She slid the book perfectly onto the desk and, whisking white streaks from her dress with archeologic fingers, returned to her usual spot sitting on the front of the huge oak box. There she pinched the wool near her knees, folded her arms and pressed on.

“Now class, this concludes our reading of Chapter Nine of *The Odyssey*. And we shall next move on to the rather famous chapter regarding Circe...”

In my semisleep I thought that land was now in sight and saw Read herself as a kind of marker on the shore. Neck bending, ribs drooping, my thoughts rolled on her words, swelled, capsized, righted. I fought to keep the distant beacon of her

head in view.

“...and let me remind you all once again about your term paper assignment which is due before the final exam. At that point I should like to receive from each of you one Expository Essay. This is to be an exercise in English Writing if I may be so bold as to use that phrase...”

Her actual words were muffled by the surf I saw in my mind’s eye. And though unable to make actual sense of them, I was trying to keep the sound midway between my ears in a stab at sonar reckoning.

“You may choose any chapter in the book that interests you. You may write no more than three pages double-spaced. This is truly all that I could bear...”

Like a monolith guarding island secrets, her ancient form loomed before the black of the board somewhere off my wavering bow. I tilted to the left to adjust, trying boldly to keep on course. Then the sea dipped to my right as someone stooped to retrieve a pen. I slipped a few more inches. A wind blew in from the deep and rustled shipboard documents.

“Do indeed try to use our precious gift of language, that is, English, the mother tongue and not street argot. Avoid your usual barbarisms at all costs. Like is not a conjunction. And feel free to resort to paragraphic form when necessary...”

Finally...landfall! I scraped the hull of my unconscious on the sandy reef. Radiant heat filled my shoes; the smell of bananas tickled my nose. Read was still ahead, beckoning, guiding. I could almost touch the moss on her skin.

“And none of your ridiculous Science Fiction,” she said as an extinct bird took wing outside the classroom. “And please boys and girls, please do try and not bore me to death!”

In a kind of pop-eyed REM sleep with tongue snaking from my gaping mouth, I pushed through the mist at the sea’s edge. Read loomed above, an ancient temple in the form of a sitting woman. What a discovery! And there in the gloom was the entrance, straight ahead, there between the bald knobs of her slightly parted knees. Sinking deeper into the seat, I could just make out the shadows of her crotch. Careful, I told myself, those are dangerous ruins...the colossal wreck of a lost tribe. Infested certainly, half-buried, brimming with decay, beetles. Undug, unvisited, petrified after eons of virginity.

“This essay of yours should try to answer some question you have about a particular chapter. Something that is not clear to you about a character’s motives or actions. I will consult with those of you who have difficulty thinking...”

I was so close now.

Men, I muttered, but turning found there were none. I was alone. The glory and the terror would all be mine. Onward! Now only a film of black fabric screened the entrance to her crypt. The boney guardians spread apart slightly as Read shifted on her desk and I saw himself, saber in hand, feet slipping in the sand, penetrating that tunnel. A chill wafted through the catacombs, bats erupted, darkness glowered...BRRRIIBNNNNNGGG!

The rasping bell signaling the end of the period wrenched me awake; my head dropped like a dumbbell, my jaw jounced, and I slammed my elbow on the edge of

the desk. The other students grabbed their books and made a beeline for the door as I slowly recovered my wits. The girl in the seat in front of me took a long time leaving, as she usually did. Ah Wanda! She took a deep breath when she stood up and tucked her shirt deeper into her thick black belt. The cones of her breasts bounced in their cups as she wriggled her tight skirt down over flabby hips. As she bent down to get her books from under the seat, her scraping calves produced the windy sound of nylons rubbing. Strands of hair danced when she piled the books with inky fingers and pressed them against her chest, covering the cleavage where her blouse was buttoned.

It was amazing. There really had been a prize at the end of the journey after all...Wanda Maples, the goddess of jugs.

The student lounge was just an open area on the second floor with some couches to collapse in between classes. The posters on those walls announced upcoming school elections: Feinstein for Veep, Vote Feinstein for Class Wit, Win with Feinstein for Class Secretary, All the way with Feinstein. Each of these was a different Feinstein because it was the most popular name in the school, one of the five basic names handed out according to skin tone: Feinstein if you were white, Kaplan for the pale gray, Delgado for the olive, Martinez for khaki, and Johnson for ebony.

I sat there sometimes just to gather my wits, even though I never succeeded, and listened to the drone of voices all around.

"I'm sicka livin' in God's fuckin' anus."

"Gross."

"I mean who the fuck's she think she is anyways?"

"Yeah no."

"You don't see me goin' around and bitchin' like that."

"Fuck no."

"No, but am I right?"

"Fuckyes."

It was all musical in the way that nature can be melodic and something about it was calming to me. I had no dreams then of being a writer but somehow thought that the back and forth of ordinary words in ordinary life would be useful to me later on. I was probably wrong about that too.

"Guess who I've got a date with next weekend. "

"Roberta."

"Roberta?"

"Okay, Susan."

"Susan? Which Susan, Feinstein or..."

"Yeah."

"Nope."

"Sheila."

"Yuk! Gimme some credit. Sheila? Get serious."

"But she's perfect for you. She's your type."

"Fuck my type."

“Okay who?”

“Gull-lore-ee-ah.”

“Gloria Kaplan?”

“The very one.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“So big fuckin’ deal.”

A slim girl holding her books like a shield was standing near the water fountain. I watched her and wondered what it would be like to be one of the books, pressed up like that against her chest, caressed and clutched. When she bent over to take a drink I thought of walking over to her and saying hi. But I didn’t.

“He got it offa some guy.”

“Who?”

“What who?”

“Who diddy get it offa?”

“Fuck should I know.”

“J’axem?”

“Fuck that.”

“So haddaya knowy gottit offa anyone?”

“He tole me.”

“And you believ’e’m?”

“Why woody lie?”

“Cause he’s fulla shit’s why!”

“Fuck it, who cares.”

“Yeah like I could giva shit.”

“Yeah like whatever.”

Jay and the Americans were singing “Only in America” on a radio somewhere and someone was being paged over the loudspeaker. Books dropped. Paper torn. The water fountain gurgled. The mindless babble babbled on. My chair was bumped but I fought the urge to look.

“Yo Neil, wassup?”

“Fuck.”

“I heard about the big date.”

“Yeah me too.”

“Fuck.”

“So what’ja get, Neil?”

“I got blueballs is what.”

“Wha? I thought her parent’s were gone.”

“They were.”

“So?”

“I tolyla, nothin’ new.”

“Nothin’? Didn’t even dry hump?”

“Oh yeah that. But no flesh. She’s too shy.”

“Shy? Lissena dis. He’s been dry humpin’ the same chick for what...two

months?”

“Nine weeks.”

“Shit Neil, it’s probably all reddened sore.”

“Ooooh...rank OUT!”

Outside of school that day there was the usual large crowd of students standing on the sidewalk in front of the massive stone arch at the entrance. Marasmus High was a grand old gothic structure sitting incongruously on Flatbush Avenue between the tailor shop and the Rialto movie theater. It looked like a castle where they keep the ghosts of lost crusades. Mothers with strollers had to weave their way through this crowd, overrunning feet, snagging jackets and skirts. I was making my way out when a car suddenly rammed into the curb. The crash of a hubcap turned heads. It was an old Buick with a mismatching green fender and a crucifix dangling from the antenna. The ceiling of the car was lined with pink pompoms ripped from the hem of tacky curtains, the dashboard was painted chartreuse, the steering wheel was covered with squirrel tails. Old magazine photos of Pancho Villa were taped to the doors. It looked as though the gypsies had conquered Detroit.

The furry balls on the roof bobbed as Chico stepped out wearing a black undershirt and cobalt pants and his familiar lopsided grin. He strutted through the bystanders who parted for him like the sea, pulling me back into his wake. At close range I saw that Chico’s sneakers had been scribbled on, that his hands were full of tarry grease, and that his forearm bore a homemade tattoo of a dagger and the word *libertad*. When he got up to the tall gothic facade of the school, Chico turned and bowed to the crowd. Then he slowly began to climb the side of the building. Stone by stone, he picked his way up the surface, with finger and sneaker tips, his muscles bulging. A mock misstep at twenty feet sent a gasp through the onlookers, but Chico merely dangled for a moment, then continued to creep upwards.

At this point, the main iron gate creaked open and Dr. Bummel, the principal of Marasmus – a bald cockalorum of a man – came striding out with his secretary. Bummel took up a cigar store pose with his hand shielding his eyes as he located Chico in his view.

“You there! Hey you. Get down from there.”

Chico scurried sideways on the wall like a spider and continued to climb.

“Miss Crohn, call the police please,” Bummel said. “I mean RIGHT NOW son.”

Chico ascended and with each new feat and foothold drew applause from the sidewalk.

“You are in mighty big trouble young man. Mightybig. Are you a student here?”

The claps magnetized the whole neighborhood and soon windows across the street flew open, stores emptied, cars honked and Sam from Sam’s Pants opened up an impromptu betting parlor. People from all over the Avenue gathered and gazed, pointed, nudged, massaged their necks.

“Down. Now fellow!” Bummel said, turning red. “Who is this, does anybody

know? Is this one of our students?"

Jeers.

Chico reached the topmost ledge of the front façade, an ornate stone frieze. He was hanging by his fingertips from the thin crack between two stones.

"Do you know this boy? The police are on their way, son!"

He swung his leg over a cornice then hoisted the rest of his body with a grunt. He stood up, teetering on the edge, and bowed ceremoniously, blowing kisses, cha-cha-ing, bugalooing. He humped the air.

Cheers.

"Well that is most certainly it," Bummel shouted. "You are on suspension as if this minute, my friend. This minute!"

Chico kingkoned the precipice; he scratched his armpits, bounced like a primate, grinned wide. Then without warning he turned his broad back to the crowd and inched backwards towards the very edge of the ledge. When he got to the endpoint balancing on his toes – his heels dangling in space like a high diver – he lowered his head and brought his arms to his crotch.

"Fuckin christ he's gone a dive!" someone muttered. "He's gonna flip off the building."

"It's a bird, it's a plane."

"Is he actually going to jump off of that ledge, Miss Crohn?" Bummel asked reasonably.

"Holy shit!" she slipped.

He did jump.

But only high enough to spin around facing the onlookers, his fly open. He was holding his weenie with glee, legs spread, pelvis forward, as he pissed on the bodies below. The uplookers ran from the shower as from molten lead but Bummel just stood there, frozen by rage.

Chico became an instant celebrity in the neighborhood and t-shirts with the phrase "Chico Rules" soon began to appear.

I finally made my way through that crowd to the corner of Church and Flatbush and that is when I first saw her. She was standing in front of the bank near the blue mailbox. She was fresh and blonde and pale and lovely. She wore a short black skirt and brown loafers which made her legs seem even paler by contrast. I noticed a dark patch on her calf and wondered what had caused it and if it felt different from the rest. Her prim nose and creamy lips and snowy cheeks stood out from the dingy surround of the Avenue. She was slightly round-shouldered like a model, flat-footed like a dancer, with a flair for hair flips like a starlet.

A true version of beauty.

Her name was Sybil.

Diane from math had asked me to give a book to a friend of hers. She would be waiting on the corner near the school and I would recognize her because she was gorgeous. Diane was right. I wondered if she noticed me as I approached and recalled a line from *The Odyssey* that I did not know I knew: "For who could see the

passage of a goddess, unless she wished his mortal eyes aware.”

“Uh...Sybil?” I asked.

“Cheese you scared me. You shouldn’t sneak up on people like that. Are you a burglar or something?”

“Sorry.”

“Do I know you? I don’t think so. Weren’t you in Paulsey’s class last year? Is your name Robert or something?”

“No. No. My name’s Daniel.”

“That’s funny, my brother’s father’s name is Daniel. Boy is he a creep. I mean my brother, not Daniel, he’s nice. Is that her?” she said scanning the dispersing crowd. “No, that’s not her. I’m waiting for a friend of mine. Anyway how’d you know my name?”

“Diane asked me to give you this. I knower from math and she had to go home after school and couldn’t meet you. So I said I’d give it to you. Here.”

“Cheese thanks.”

“That’s okay.”

“Yup that’s my book okay. What was all that shouting about?”

“Some guy climbed the front of the building and pissed on Dr. Bummel.”

“Yuck, that gross!”

“I know.”

“Well...thanks a lot. I guess I don’t have to wait then, I’ll go home. Which way you walking?”

“Which way you?”

“That.”

“Me too.”

“Neat.”

“Yeah.”

We walked down past the fruit stand manned by the guy with the neck thing, the grocery store, the shoe place where they played the blues, the candy stand with the dog that was always wet. Then past Joey’s Pizza, Bohacks, Glenda’s Curl Up And Dye, Footfarm, Tony’s Pizza, Burgermaster, Presidential Cleaners. And Mandell’s, Sew What, The Drug Maven. And Grea Se Food, which was nothing more than two letters gone from the original Great Sea Food sign.

The old neighborhood, flat as old seltzer, but this time it seemed to sparkle just a bit because of the heaving in the heart, the stirrings of romance.

Which is another way of saying that Sybil was really cute.

And then an ordinary evening, sluggish, unheroic. Clouded light shimmered in through the curtains as I slouched down the hallway on the way to the bathroom. The air was cold there and I also detected the sour smell of roach spray. Familiar. That old hallway, never painted, eternally dark, with the bulletin board on the far wall and the closet door at the end.

I must have stopped for a moment midway down that hall and wondered if or how I could ever get to the end of it. There was so much past there that it seemed to

stretch out faster than my feet. Six years earlier in that very hallway my father had grabbed his stomach and placed his other hand on the wall to steady himself, then he turned with great difficulty and retreated to his bedroom.

He had not said a word and stayed in bed that day while I went to school; I knew that seemed wrong but never asked about it. When my aunt picked me up after school, which she never did, and took me to stay with my cousins that night for a sleepover, which I never had before, even though I was only ten I somehow knew that my life had changed forever. Back home the rooms were filled with silent visitors and my mother holding me so tight and stiff and struggling through her tears to tell me that my father was dead.

Something caught in my gut whenever I remembered that.

I had dreams for years of him coming home from work as usual and of him trying to say something to me but in the dream the words were muffled. What was it? My father was not a gabber, a banterer, or a blitherer. I could count on one hand the things I remembered that he had ever said to me. Some jokes, a few funny names, goofy sayings like the Ajax jingle or that ditty about Augustus J McCann who was a henpecked married man and he'd been married to his wife since married life began.

There had been no instructions, no advice, no last wishes, no prose. No manly hints. No wisdom, no quote. I could have used a few words from him, words to keep close and hidden like an heirloom. Man to boy. Instructions in life. Any old word would have done...a catchword, password, byword, a word or two about girls and what to do about them. Or about money or willpower or perseverance or hope. Pinochle even. Baseball. Almost anything would have done. But there had been nothing, not even in my dreams, and this silence filled the book of what I did not know about being a man.

Meanwhile I moved along the floor, edging closer to the bathroom door, taking perhaps one half of a snailstep forward. And time, flexible as a thought, slowed down to a crawl.

What I did recall about him were his hands, warm and solid, and their impression on the back of my head. Yellow hands due to nicotine stains on the nails or to that gold watch face. Tuesday nights my father used to sit at the desk in my room and manicure his nails while I lay in bed and tried to ignore the darkness. Perhaps the hand in my memory was tinted by the ochre shade on the lamp there. As I drifted off to sleep, my father would walk over and gently slide his hands down my face, rolling my eyelids closed.

I finished that step, shifted my weight in tilting to the left, began another. No rush. The clock in memory has no spring, so they say.

When I was nine I insisted that my father not kiss me anymore: I was too big to be kissed, men did not kiss. They shook hands like in the movies. I felt bad about that after – did I hurt his feelings? – but as I reached out for the bathroom doorknob, I suddenly saw the why of it. Maybe it was about the hand...the coarse but gentle touch, the square knuckles, the thick skin, the flat tips, the calluses. The warm yellow. Maybe I liked that better than a mere kiss.

Then the interim collapsed on itself and duration returned and the hallway shuddered behind me. Only a thin buzz of attraction was left between all those moments, shattering into their separateness, like slices of the universe that never know of each other, never reveal themselves.

It was hard to be a boy without a father.

Maybe almost as hard as being a boy with one.

CHAPTER THREE



Like the roaring wind that blew Odysseus and his crew back to Aeolia, no matter how I tried to break the spell I always seemed to be back in that French class with no idea what anyone was saying or why. And there was M. Crache sitting at the front, his bald head glinting, the wart over the eyebrow, the globus nose, the mounds of fat cinched by the belt, the loose drape of flesh under his chins that flapped as he rolled his r's, pursed his u's and flexed his circonflex. There he was babbling away again. It was comforting in a way because it meant that I would not be called on for a good fifteen minutes, gallows time.

Instead I was making a list in my notebook of all the words that I knew for penis. Shlong, pecker, peter, prick, dick, dingler, wazoo, wang, dingle, cock, meat, hairy sausage, poker, ding, wangler, wangle, rod, dangler. Guykind's creative contribution to language.

On cue, Crache stretched his right hand back around his bulby hips, slipped down in the seat with eyes ceilingward, and emerged after a tussle with a handkerchief. Without missing a beat he hucked up and spit a lump of phlegm into the mitt, packaged it neatly, then returned it to the rear pocket and returned to the play we were reading. Trying to convey the musicality of the language, he put a bounce in the lyric, read both parts and the stage directions, threw in anecdotes from his days on Rue de la Grasse. His chin flaps flailed wildly. He spit, he chattered, he exuded.

"Quoi! Le beau nom de fille est un titre, ma soeur...cheeff! Dont vous voulez quitter la charmante douceur..."

I glanced over at the text on my desk distantly as though it were a book of runes from a lost world, inscriptions without a key. Was there a single word in there that I knew? Was the book upside down?

"Alors, bien mes etudiants. Et maintenant continuez Monsieur...hucca hucca hucccht!..."

Crache was about to call on someone to read and I could feel the drop in carbon dioxide as we all held our breaths, the aura of faith rising as we each, in our own way, prayed.

"Monsieur Feinsein," Crache announced and the air and atheism returned.

The girl sitting to my right was the legendary Marlene Buzanth. She was eighteen in every way...waist, age, IQ. The wet dream queen, she had dropped out of school the previous year to have a baby. No one knew who the father was; there was a rumor that she had slept with the entire basketball team, city champs, and another that she had had all the other teams too. She was a venereal goddess standing

lusciously at a scum pond, turning droves of boys into grunting swine, wallowing in their mudhood.

Her hair was huge, teased up and out like a blimp and she wore so much make-up that her face took on the look and feel of an orange with elaborate lashes. And then there were those breasts, eons before enhancement. The natural history of breasts points to the gentle Catskills, the stark Ozarks, the rolling Berkshires, the bulging Tetons, the magnificent Rockies, the massive Andes, the breathtaking Himalayas. In junior high I kissed a girl named Jill who had bad breath and a chest like the sand dunes on Brighton Beach. Marlene's were alpine peaks, firm and pointed, but also jiggly as she turned each page of her book, pretending to keep up. Her black skirt was stretched so tight that, by craning my neck impossibly, I could just see the dark top of her gray stockings. That edge of color rolled over her thigh and down into the valley of my delirium.

Back at sea level, Feinstein had stopped reading and I returned to the textbook, desperately searching for a headhold, any jut of a word that I knew. But I was lost. The center crease of the book became Marlene's thighs, the rough surface her lacquered skin. I touched it. It moved.

"Alors. Et bien Monsieur Feinstein. Tres bien. Maintenant, traduisez s'il vous plait, Monsieur... Newman!"

ME?

I turned white.

Definitely on the wrong page...or was I? Wasn't I? I caught the name Poquelin in the middle of the text, which rang a bell, but was it Moliere or Voltaire or Racine? Or was it Corneille? Flipping the pages frantically, not knowing what to look for, the letters jumped around like *petits diables*.

"Monsieur Newman...traduisez, s'il vous plait!"

The world loomed narrow. A jitter of alien words flashed before my eyes. On the sides of this funnel I noticed the tease of a door, the curve of a calf, a billion eyes watching me, and somewhere at the periphery my own shaking hands.

"Monsieur Newman...ahec, ahec, BREHEEEEECHT!"

I have no recollection how I got through that French class nor any of the others I took throughout high school. But I do know that I had a fateful meeting right after the class that day. Fateful in the way that Brooklyn is...which means vaguely and without drama. I had an appointment to see my college prep advisor who would help me chart the course of my future.

Beatrice Deeps was at her desk looking proper, prim and primed for business. She wore thick glasses in the shape of oyster shells, as if she had spent time welding fish, and a seahorse pin on her flannel jacket. She hardly moved her thin lips when she spoke, like a bad ventriloquist, and I ended up watching the seahorse instead.

"Whell now let's see, it's Mister..."

"Daniel Newman."

"Good. All righty then Mister Noon why don't you have a seat while I peruse your academic record. Then we'll see what we can see, how's that?"

“Fine.”

She took a thin manila folder out of the file cabinet and rolled the drawer back like they do in the morgue in the movies. Deeps scanned the data of my corpse by focusing her lenses like binoculars. She frowned.

“I see. Yes whell...you’re certainly not doing very well are you Mister Noon. You are quite young for a junior but you haven’t quite lived up to your promise, hmm? You’ve got a rather low grade point average don’t you.”

“Not as good as it could be. I mean, like, I guess it could be better. I’m not really, well like, y’know...”

“Well like y’know. No Mister Noon I do not know.”

She paused while I tried to figure out exactly what it was that she did not know but nothing came.

“I see. Whell Noon, we ordinarily choose three colleges for our juniors to start thinking about this year that they may make application to next year. One idealistic, one realistic, and one safe choice. However, in your case, unless there is substantial improvement in your academic standing between now and next year, I simply do not see...”

She held her lenses between thumb and forefinger as she said this and dazzled the light into my eyes as though switching from ventriloquism to heliotrope.

“Whell, what can you have to say for yourself Noon? Hmm? I suspect not much. Now tell me have you ever considered going right into the work market after your graduation rather than risking college?”

“No college?” I gulped.

It was out of the question; my mother would kill me first.

“Precisely. You do catch on.”

“Work?”

“Young man, it is quite clear from your records that you do not in point of fact have the cerebral material to succeed in college. There are thousands of bright, dedicated young scholars all vying for a limited number of slots in our schools of higher education. Do you put yourself in that class? Certainly not. You’d better start thinking seriously...”

“But...”

“Buts are for rams Mister Noon. Your academic record is frankly an embarrassment. Seventy-five, seventy-five, SIXTY-FIVE? Teams...none. Student activities...none. Social service...none.”

She dropped the folder like sea slime.

“I do not see anything here to indicate to me potential for success, let alone advanced degree work. You are a space taker, young man, and nothing more. Some people are simply not suited to the life of the intellect. There’s really nothing terribly wrong with this, I suppose the world needs mechanics and plumbers too.”

“Plumbers?”

“Tell me Noon, have you encountered even one thing that has made any sort of impression on you?”

Teased hair, round breasts, oily lips, and ear lobes with tiny pearl studs in them

came to mind but to my credit I had the sense that Deeps would not get it.

“Human sexuality,” I said, struggling for something to report.

“I see,” she intoned and wrote something down in the file that, from my angle, looked an awful lot like she was crossing out my name on some fateful ledger.

Oddly enough, I did not think Deeps was right. Not about college but about plumbing. I knew that was not for me; pipes take a kind of precision of thought that I did not have. But beyond that, all was murky. Standing at my gym locker later that day, my reflection in the dull sheen of the metal was also a blur. No details, just the basic shape of head and shoulders, as unclear as everything else. Damp benches, boys in saggy jockey shorts, jockstraps, the grim facades on row after row of those grey lockers. The odors of sweat socks, abused sneakers, unwashed T-shirts. The dense fume of chlorinated water.

Was there something to understand about the world in all this?

Not at all.

But I had some time before the class started and so I took out another of those letters from Candy and read it:

Daniel,

It's Thursday now and very beautiful. I'm with my parents in Virginia so I thought I'd finish this letter. The temp is about 60 down here and there is a mist over the 12 mile expanse of the lake but opposite me I can see the huge bluff jutting out. Two ducks oblivious to the fact that they are now part of my recorded history go by. I'm quiet now yet there is a vast amount of energy in me pining for release yet it cannot escape.

I loathe the academics; its infringement on my time, its lack of personal meaning, its basic absurdity. For how can one learn about life in a classroom? Love is only to be grasped through living it! My only excuse for sanity is my friend who I told you about who suffers from the same pangs as I do. She is a superlative individual and we give each other the ultimate understanding. (This is what I want to find in you) Neither of us have many other friends altho we have many acquaintances. We are egocentric, refuse to be humble and find it extremely difficult to really communicate with other human beings. Therefore we truly revel in each other.

I've eliminated the Peace Corps from my future possibilities. I want to be responsible to myself not to a group, organization or government. I'm very selfish. I love talking to you (and writing). I wish it were more frequent. It is imperative to find someone who can give you understanding.

I intend to welcome you into my shell. Take care dear Daniel.
Candy

Then some idiot bumped into me and knocked the letter into a puddle on the floor and I watched it turn the ink into a blue stream that flowed down to the drain.

“Getoff my towel will ya?” said the kid who bumped me.

“Fuckyou,” said his friend.

“Getoff my fuckin towel.”

“Fuck.”

“Look it, don’t be a schmuck aright? Just get the hell off it.”

“Ain’t on y’fuckin towel you jerk.”

“Yeah? What’s at?”

“Wha.”

“Dis. Dis!”

“Fuck should I know.”

“My towel’s what. Off it!”

“Urine idiot.”

“C’mon. Come ON!”

“Look, will you kindly do me a big favor and please go and fuck yourself.”

“Hey schmuckface, off it. Come on...OFF!”

“Fuck!”

“Seriously Dennis, get off. You’re awl fuckin’ WET!”

“So what.”

“Y’gettin IT fuckin’ wet, at’s what.”

“So? It’s a goddamn towel aint it? It SUPPOSED a get wet.”

“You admit you’re on it!!”

“Christ are you a jerk.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck.”

Then the pop, pop, pop of the locker doors. I quickly pulled my white shorts on the wrong way and did a twisty hop-step to get them on right. Upstairs in the cavernous gym with my fellow runts, we took our assigned places on the scarred wooden floor.

“Atten-HUT,” someone shouted as Mr. Lummock entered.

Like all gym teachers everywhere, Lummock in his mind was no instructor; he was a general in the army of the fit. No neck, no joints; just a ball of thickly packed flesh. The elastic strap that held his glasses on his head was so tight that as he turned to survey the troops, you could see his cranium deform.

As his assistant read the attendance to a rhythm of here’s and yo’s – plus the occasional “present” from a random clod – Lummock marched through the rank and file scrutinizing, cajoling, nitpicking. He did this with great glee the way a cannibal might lust for a liver. When he blew his whistle, bloated red bags formed on his neck.

“Awright! Lissen up! Yer C.O. is talking. Today I am going to kick some ass into your numb skulls and get everybody’s butt in the press. I’m talking wrestling

drills so buddy up!”

Lummock reminded us that he had been the Wisconsin State Wrestling Champion but that was another time when boys were men not bimbos. Once teamed, he told us to lock arms, duck heads and, on the whistle, push as hard as possible against your foe until you pushed him off his mark.

I found some lightweight who would not embarrass me to push against and pushed. He pushed back. The other kid’s elbows dug into my shoulder joint and I began to lose footing. My sneakers were so old they had no tread and I was slipping backwards. Suddenly the slide stopped; Lummock had placed his own foot behind my heel.

“Push, push, push,” he shouted and I did.

Then, still not happy, he put his massive Wisconsin farm hands on my back and pushed my pushing. The other boy grunted and dug in. I dug in. Lummock intoned and pushed. The other boy pushed back, his elbows so deep in my shoulder that he pushed my shoulder bone right out of its socket.

I stood up. There was a dent where my shoulder should have been and the knob at the top of my upper arm bone was stuck a few inches below the socket. The room was silent as the other boys stopped pushing and gaped.

Quietly and with great decorum I thought, I walked to the door, went into the bathroom, and put my hand under my underarm. I was probably only prepping for the pain to come but somehow I accidentally shoved the bone back into place. The heat dissolved; the tendon trilled; I could move my arm again. As calmly as a shopkeeper tidying up, I threw up, brushed my hair back, slipped on some piddle on the way out the door, and took my spot again in the gym lineup.

Lummock surveying the troops was walking down the row and stopped at the boy next to me.

“What the hell is that, son?”

“Hah?” he said.

“That. That,” Lummock said, poking at the kid’s mouth.

“Gum?”

“Gum what?”

“Gum sir?”

“Gumser. It’s gumser,” he repeated. “Well isn’t that just too dandy. Isn’t that just peachy keen. Isn’t that nifty-doo?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now I want you to do me, do all of us, a little bit of a favor. Okay son? Just a little teensy weensy bit of a favor.”

“Okay sir.”

“I want you to hark your carcass over to the can. You follow me so far? I don’t want to go too fast for you. Then I want you to take a piece of toilet paper...you know what that is don’t you?”

“Yes sir.”

“Then I want you to put your gumser into it and place said package into the trash pail. You with me so far?”

“Yes sir.”

And now Lummock’s voice rose to full profundo as he dug in his heels, turtled his head, flexed his temple vein, turned deep crimson, and shouted:

“And then gimme TEN LAPS CAUSE THERE AINT NO GUM CHEWING IN GYM CLASS. GET IT? NO GUM IN GYM.”

And then quietly to me, next in line:

“You okay, son?”

“Fine sir,” I fluted.

“You sure?”

“Yes sir.”

“You funnin me boy?”

“No sir, sir.”

“Then PLAY BALL!!

I took a detour on the way home that day. I was on a mission and soon found myself standing across the street from a brick building on Albermarle Road with a low brick wall in front and dust where hedges should have been. Typical Brooklyn architecture by someone who never got the degree, but that building was special.

It was Sybil’s building.

I had already walked her home a few more times but I was still too nervous to actually call her so I concocted a plan to accidentally run into her. It worked too. After waiting for only an hour or so, she came strolling up the street. I made some excuse about visiting a cousin which she must have fallen for since she seemed truly surprised. She invited me upstairs.

Sybil lived in a small apartment on the fourth floor with her mother who was out shopping. So we sat on the couch eating Ebenger’s Blackout Cake, crumbs tumbling onto the floor, while she picked through some magazine. Her four fingers stroked each page down to its edge before flipping over to the next one. She scraped her top teeth across her lower lip. When something interested her, she stopped to examine it and clicked her nails together. I watched her in a stupor; these gestures seemed magical to me.

“Cats, ugh I hate cats,” she said. “Isn’t this stupid looking...this guy’s face? I hate guys with faces like that, y’know what I mean? He’s so smug.”

“I guess so.”

“And cars, cars. So many cars.”

“You don’t like cars?”

“Who said I don’t like cars? I love cars...nice cars. Not like station wagons. Did you ever see that car Billy Boyd used to drive last year? That Plymouth with the tigerskin seats? Cheese. He practically raped me in it before we broke up. That was a neat car.”

“You went out with Billy Boyd?” I gasped.

Everyone in Marasmus knew Billy Boyd. He was the most admired bully in the neighborhood, a fifties throwback, a cross between Elvis Presley, James Dean and Torquemada. He ruled the Saints who ruled the other gangs who ruled the

Avenue. I had seen him in front of Marasmus leaning languidly against that car, smoking deeply, looking at his dull boots, muscular and tall, with a face that only an auto mechanic could love. He had been suspended from school for punching the handball coach in the nose.

“You didn’t know I went out with him? I though everyone knew. Diane thought I was nuts but my Mom liked him.”

She continued looking through the magazine, the crisp sound of turned pages slicing through the dead air. I whisked some of the debris off my jeans and only then was aware of the stiffness under the denim. I had a hard-on, as crude and cold as a whale’s baculum. Embarrassed, I shifted in the seat, picked up a glass ashtray, turned it over then put it back. I thought about leaning in to kiss her ear but that moment passed. The time seemed stretched and strained...not taut like waiting but twisted with expectation.

“I’m bored,” she yawned still flipping.

“You wanna do somethin’?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno...like make out.”

“Cheese. Zat all boys ever think of?”

It was.

I stifled a phony yawn as she continued to fan through the pages for a second time, finally placing the magazine on the coffee table. The ad on the back cover said ‘Real Gusto’ in large brown letters. Sybil moved back and sat cross-legged on the couch and I rolled into the valley she made, using the impetus to pilot my lips into a kissing landing.

Her eyes were closed, revealing azure lids. Her nostrils flared as she inhaled and minute folds of skin rippled at the bridge of her nose. Her bangs cast tender shadows on her cheeks. There was not a single blemish on her skin and her lips were the softest surfaces I had ever felt.

But at the same time I could feel the feel of my own skeleton: the stiffness in the throat, prickly nausea, that heavy pressure in the gut, dull pains through the shoulder muscles running from the neck partly down the arm, queasiness, a tight nipping in the rectum, the erection of course, frets on the forehead, quaking hands, a lump in the swallow. I was trying to figure out what to do next, how to proceed into that future that never exists until it does...but I was stuck. Keep kissing, use my tongue, touch her breast? Say something sexy?

I knew how to do all that; I just did not know how to do it *with her*. Go far enough but not too far; be bold but not reckless. On the other hand those plushy pillows, her immense lips, that cottony chin, her breath fanning my cheek, her thin tongue, maybe all that was good enough for the moment.

Maybe it was.

Until she tapped my erection by accident and I began to giggle like an idiot.

CHAPTER FOUR



The next morning began another day like all the others. Which to me meant dull. Dull as soppy cereal, as uncreased trousers. Dull as a spoon. I stared out of the kitchen window into the apartment across the alley where nothing was also taking place. Months ago I had seen a naked lady flash by in the recess of the room and had been watching hopefully ever since. But nothing.

Dull dull dull.

The radio announced the morning news: IBM had developed System/360 a new generation of mainframe computers; Gemini 1 successfully launched the first test of the 2-man spacecraft; the new James Bond film *From Russia with Love* had opened; the UN Security Council adopted a resolution deploring a British air attack on a fort in Yemen.

Dull as the word mercantilism.

Then my mom walked in and jumped when she saw me.

“You scared the living daylights out of me,” she said.

“Boo.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Sitting.”

“Won’t you be late for school?”

“No, I still have time.”

“Don’t be late too much. Be careful about that.”

“I am.”

“I worry about you.”

“I know.”

My mom was always worried about me. In fact she was probably worried about everything but that included me. I never knew exactly what she thought was going to happen...that I would get in an accident, make some girl pregnant, do something stupid with my life? She had a way of looking at me with worried eyes, eyebrows twisted into question marks, that I inherited. When I look at myself in the mirror now I see her looking at me and fretting about what might happen next.

“Did you get that letter I left for you on the table?”

“Yup.”

“Who is this Candy who keeps writing to you?”

“Just a girl I know.”

“From school?”

“No. She goes somewhere else.”

“Are you going out with her? I’ve been meaning to ask you this.”

“Nah.

“I thought you were seeing someone named Sylvia.”

“Sybil.”

“You aren’t dating two girls at the same time are you? I hope you’re not being foolish like that.”

“Me? Nah.”

“Be careful.”

“I know.”

When I was in third grade I remember that she used to help me with my writing. She was a teacher so her help was helpful. She would sit with a pencil and go over what I had written for class. She would make suggestions by writing them in on my paper. Then while explaining what she meant, she used to nonchalantly correct my signature, looping the loops, flaring the curves, darkening the lines. My signature! I always felt funny about that but later on – much later – I understood the point. It was nothing personal, nothing wrong with my signature per se. It was simply that everything had to be done very carefully because the world was treacherous and the slightest slip could lead to disaster.

“All right. Don’t forget your keys,” she said looking for her own.

“I don’t.”

“And have something other than pizza for lunch.”

“I will.”

“It’s chilly out today, take your jacket,” she said putting on hers.

“I know.”

And she kissed the air and opened the door and, unable to resist, turned to me with those sage words that ring in my ears:

“Be careful,” she said instead of goodbye.

“Okay,” I said, meaning I will.

Dull and white.

The white paint on the kitchen walls or the napkin or the milk. The appliances. Even my own pasty skin. They sold white on television because white was all American and modern and worth the money. It was the color of sugar and cleanser and sweat socks, paper, teeth, milk, cigarettes, aspirin, Washington DC. Monument to, movement towards, and mania of...all rolled into one. White, off white, almost white, whiter, whitest.

Starting to get dressed for school, I opened the drawer and saw that copy of *Playboy* I had hidden under the underwear. I picked it up and the centerfold unfolded automatically. It was the standard picture of a naked woman posing on a fur rug in front of a dark wood-paneled wall. Her long auburn hair spilled over her left shoulder and her right one was thrust forward, tickled by strands of the thick hair. The skin that covered her curves was as smooth as paper and I ran my fingers over them just to make sure.

She was propping up her torso with her arms and this caused her breasts to

balloon together, her nipples to swell, her cleavage to heave. Her knees were spread on the rug and where her pubic hair should have been, a tuft of fur stuck up and suggested. Her angelic face had a familiar expression that I had seen on countless pretty faces on countless pages in sex magazines...the languid, still smile, that teasing turn of the head, those deep eyes.

As always in that moment I was lured in. This folded babe was suddenly all I ever wanted. I placed her down delicately on the dresser and with a spitty hand rubbed away furiously. The more I rubbed, the more she drew me in until she was no photo anymore but a living breathing yearning woman who was there for me and me alone. When I was done and feeling relieved, I mopped up with a tissue and began to refold her into the magazine.

It was odd., as though droplets of desire had leaked out with my other fluids. Her intense allure was gone and her power over me faded. Now she was just another halftone trapped on her page, forever perfect and glossy. An erotic ghost frozen in space and flat as paper.

Until the next time.

The church of Church Avenue was officially the Reformed Orthodox Church of Brooklyn, an old relic built in the seventeenth century and one of the first churches in the new world. Tintypes in the Principal's office already showed it as an antique sitting tall among the low sheep farms of early Brooklyn. It had a small cemetery in the back where Pieter Van Hoot and his family and friends hooted their final hoot.

We were standing next to one of the old stones that evening trying, as usual, to sort things out.

"Did you or did you not," the Dingler asked.

"Sort of," Herbie said.

"You little worm, jew get laid?"

"C'mon, Herbie, did you or did you not. What's the situation?"

"Sort of."

"What does that mean?"

"We humped alot."

"Dry?"

"Well...yeah."

"A disgrace! Even bugs dry hump," the Dingler said.

"Then I felt her up...under her shirt."

"Then what? "

"Well...then she pulled my dick out."

"This gets worse and worse," Vinnie groaned.

"And then she played with it."

"Does this girl wear glasses?"

"Microscopes," I suggested.

"Then she put it in her mouth."

"That pulpy little mass?"

“Dingler, I’m gonna throw up. I’m sick. Get the antidote!”

“Can you believe this?”

“Wait there’s more,” Herbie pleaded. “I played with her pussy.”

“Please stop, I’m violently ill.”

“Is there a doctor in the church?” I cried.

“Is there justice in the world?” the Dingler added.

“And then...?”

“Her parents came home.”

“Suck.”

“Shit.”

“Definitely shit.”

“But we’re goin’ out again Friday night. To see *Tom Jones*.”

“All right Herbert, you’ve redeemed yourself,” the Dingler said.

“Fuck you.”

“What’d I say?”

“You said Herbert,” I explained.

“Oops, sorry Herbert.”

“Fuck you.”

“Okay, all seriousness aside, I hope you intend to become a man upon leaving the movie theater.”

“If not sooner.”

“I hope we fuck I hope we fuck,” Herbie sang, gripping his crotch.

“Be cool.”

“I hope we fuck.”

And down Flatbush Avenue again, that boulevard of raw commerce and dull commotion. At the window of Masterburger the oil from four fat patties on the grill flared up into a plume. The chef swigged soda from the bottle, jiggled a vat of fries in its bubbling cauldron, then flopped the meat over. It flared higher. He wiped his forehead on his sleeve.

A sign at Bohacks read: “Get ‘em now: Gals and Jugs. That prompted a whole new round of questions. How many girls we would have for how long and in how many ways and how often. How long it should last, how long it could take. We were experts with little experience and all this had nothing much to do with love or murmurs of the heart. It was a kind of bullying by the hormones. The lecherous infection. Then on closer inspection the Bohacks sign actually read: Capps Apple Juice, Your Choice of Sizes, Get ‘em now, Gal’s And Jugs.

So we moved on.

Walking under the marquis of the Astor movie theater, bulbs missing from the array gave the impression of a toothless clown at the carnival. The tall ladder on the far side of the overhang was meant for someone changing the letters for a new movie but when we reached the foot the ladder was empty.

“So where’s Sybil tonight,” the Dingler asked.

“Adonno. Maybe she’s on the Avenue.”

“Who the fuck is Sybil?” Vinnie asked.

“She’s this girl,” I said.

“From Marasmus?”

“Yeah.”

“Who is she?”

“This girl I met.”

“Does she know about Candy?” Herbie asked.

“Don’t start with that again. I’m not goin’ out with Candy.”

“Well Candy’s sure going out with you.”

“I mean we’re not goin’ out. I’m not takiner out.”

“Meeting up at parties is going out.”

“No it ain’t.”

“Is.”

“Ain’t.”

“Is.”

The guy at the candy stand blew his beaky nose as he adjusted a small television, sold a paunchy man a pack of gum, replaced some lifesavers. Some girls in tight dungarees and leather jackets emerged from the shaded vestibule of Lady Guenevere. The one with the brown lipstick lit up a cigarette and threw the match in our direction. At Pete’s Pizza we went in just as Pete was spinning the disc of dough in the air. He caught it on his fists, patted it down on the wooden board with floury thumbs, ladled tomato sauce in a spiraling splash on the surface then tossed shreds of cheese on top.

“Slice.”

“Slice.”

“Slice.”

“Okay tree slice. Shees a salam?”

“Hah?”

“You wanna shees or you wanna salam?”

“Cheese’s fine.”

“Me too.”

“Me, anchovies.”

“Gotta no anchove, it’s a finish.”

“Okay then nothing. Just cheese.”

“Soda? Coe, Peps?”

“Yeah Coke.”

“Me too.”

“Coke.”

“Tree Coe. Essa turdy sets each.”

The coins clattered on the counter under the glare of Jesus peering down from the wall behind the large steel oven. This was a droopy Jesus, hanging from the cross like an old sock as though the combined smell of hot tomatoes and kitty litter had done him in. On the opposite wall the blithering salvos of a pinball machine competed with the radio that Pete turned up to drown all the other noise. They

were playing "I Wanna Hold Your Hand."

"I can't stand the Beatles," Herbie said.

"Me too," I said.

"Rolling Stones are better," Vinnie said.

"I like doo-wop. What ever happened to doo-wop?"

"Woe woe woe, woe woe woe, woe woe woe, woe!"

"Blue Moon...you left me standing alone..."

"That's Hush-A-Bye not Blue Moon."

"No it isn't."

"It is."

Further down the Avenue we walked by Molly's Discounts, The House Of Rugs, Dean's Lean Meats and The Ladies Shoppe where amber street lamps overrode the moon and gave the window manikins a cadaverous blush. Bonnie and Collide auto repair.

"Guess Sybil ain't out tonight," I said.

"You in love with her?" Vinnie asked watching his breath condense on the glass of Shoe City.

"Adonno. I think abouter alot. It's kinda fucked up."

"What is?"

"Thinking abouter alot."

"Hey...love is love," Vinnie said as he drew a lopsided heart on the mist. "Nobody's ever figured it out so just enjoy it."

"Adonno. I don't know what I'm doin'."

"No one does. You jess gotta do what you do and that's what you're doing."

"Yeah guess," I agreed.

The stretch of the avenue from that point on was desolate. It was not Flatbush any more but another neighborhood whose name no one knew. The light posts drifted out in a line like lonely buoys on the uncharted ocean. Dim, vacant, it seemed like the edge of the world, the bank of the sea of forgetting. We turned away from all that and walked back up Flatbush Avenue towards the jazzy lights.

Lying in bed that night like a slice of baloney between white sheets, I could not sleep. I watched the guitar with the broken string in the corner, the carved wooden leaf on the mirror frame, the sweat sock creeping to freedom from the middle drawer hoping they would lull me. But no dice. All was still...the air was still and I was still in high school, still without a clue, and still a virgin.

I got out another letter from Candy to pass the time.

Dearest Daniel,

Oh I met the most fantastic person. My Spanish teacher was absent and we had a real authentic Spaniard. Her name was Senora Bianco and she was in the Spanish-American War, she's ancient. She was wounded in the war and has a horrible limp and she can't write with her left hand and she makes her question marks back-

wards but with loads and loads of grace.

It isn't every day you see a question mark with such absolute beauty! Anyway she's very short but is absolutely formidable looking absolutely Spanish. She has really long white hair and lovely wrinkles " she amazes me. So strong and just everything. I can picture her as a leader in the Cuban revolution. Holy God she's absolutely great. In the beginning of the period my class was going wild but by the end there was absolute quiet. How can you ignore '!Silencio!' from someone like that? If I saw her on the subway I'd probably think she was someone's grandmother and nothing but she's so much more.

Do you think older people should be respected because they're old? I never know. I can never make up my mind what I want or think must talk to you about it someday. It is definitely too complicated for a letter.

You don't have to write as often as me. I mean I'd love it but if you feel obligated don't.

Didja ever notice how words just miss saying what you feel. Emotions are overpowering words aren't. Maybe that's why my letters are so bad.

I always wonder why I never think I know anything and everybody else knows more than me. Everybody sounds like an expert on everything, you know what I mean? Oh forget it. Besides as my shrink says, that's only what you know and it's very trivial.

Remind me to tell you about the guy from France that I met. You're almost like him. Not really but remind me anyway.

I have a card to send you if I ever remember. It's adorable.

Do you like people? I betcha you do, you couldn't be consistently cheerful if you didn't.

Did you ever climb a mountain?

The letter ended with some LLD's (Last Little Doodads), the inevitable heart squiggle and I LOVE U big and scrawny.

But what did it all mean?

What did she want through all these letters? She once said that she wanted to be a writer so maybe she was just practicing on me. But she also said that she loved being in love and she might have been rehearsing that as well. I wanted to cure my virginity above all but did that mean pretending to be in love with someone I just liked talking to?

And how could she possibly think I was cheerful?

And then there was Sybil with her golden hair and her silky skin. She was perfect, maybe too perfect to even dream of tarnishing with my fantasies. Did she want me to start to undress her? If so, when and how? And if not, why not? Should I just start or ask her permission first? Would I see her differently afterwards like

those centerfolds?

Did any of this matter in my quest?

I thought about all the girls I had known like the ones I sent notes to (Bonnie, Susie) or the ones whose cheeks I kissed (Gail, Sandy, Jane) or who had pulled my hand away (Norma, Cathy) or the ones I had fretted about, tried to avoid, adored or detested. Cheryl, Rebecca, Marion, Susan. Even Barbara in second grade to whom I sent the urgent telegram "I love you do you love me I think your pretty."

It seemed that tucked into every corner of my worries were wisps of women or pictures of women or dreams of or fears of. Also there were all the pieces of me I had to be for them: Sybil's silly Daniel, Candy's cheerful Daniel, my mom's worrismatic Daniel, Read's dumb Daniel. Even the centerfold's horny Daniel. Fragments of a personality.

And school was no help.

What was the use of all that stuff you learned anyway? I did not know why or when anything happened and did not care. What did all those wars and polynomials and *bon mots* and kings have to do with me and girls and getting laid? I already felt bloated with dates, stuffed with news, fed up with facts, pushed and pulled, pummeled. What I really wanted to do was to make room, to vomit up all the tidbits, all those details. But all I could manage were a few dry heaves every now and then.

Nothing made sense to me, no future seemed right. It was not that I felt nothing, just the opposite. I felt too much. Too much at stake; too many choices. Too many people wanting too many Daniels from me.

I glanced over to the desk and saw my copy of *The Odyssey* there. Opening it I came to this passage:

"Down in the sty and snort among the rest!' Without a word, I drew my sharpened sword and in one bound held it against her throat. She cried out, then slid under to take my knees, catching her breath to say, in her distress... 'put up your weapon in the sheath. We two shall mingle and make love upon our bed.'"

Was that the secret...a sharpened sword? Bold action? Was it all about balls?

To my fifteen year old mind, Odysseus was a hero because he did not take shit from anyone, even a goddess. He took charge. No bullshit.

Was that the key? To learn how to demand and insist, not give an inch, not take any guff. Maybe. But I felt soft at the core and I knew that life was not an epic, there was no way to write together the wanting and the getting and edit out the vast empty spaces in between.

A breeze came in through the slit between the window and the sill. The gentle wisps pushed my hair into a tuft as I fell asleep and dreamed about a huge building, like an airline terminal, with crowds and corridors and stairways and rooms. I raced around to find a toilet but door after door led to something else. I saw a Men's Room sign but inside was an auditorium filled with toilets and brimming with crappers, piddlers, idlers, families having picnics and a dense and musky odor. More rooms, more doors, another auditorium and then another, countless rows of pots without blinders, without stall or shame. I finally found a toilet but the door

would not close, found another but the lock would not lock.

Etcetera.

Found a good one, closed the door, locked the lock but groups of people kept barging in through other doors like drunks in a funhouse.

When I woke up the next morning even the dull white world struck me as a reprieve from all that.

CHAPTER FIVE



Tinmann called the class to order by banging a Bunsen burner on the table.

He was not just any old Tinmann, he was *Doctor* Tinmann, short and staunch like a cork. There was a rumor that a few years before, he had accidentally blown up the chemistry lab by mixing too much of this or not enough of that. Or vice-versa...no one was sure. Science classes were cancelled for an entire semester and Tinmann became a hero for a while.

Now lordling over shiny new equipment, Tinmann probed the deeps of his lab coat pockets for chalk. The linty piece he retrieved broke on contact with the board. He produced another which he dropped and stepped on, then another that screeched. Shoulders hopped. More chalk. One flew out of his hand and landed in a Pyrex vial. The class convulsed with laughter.

Tinmann tugged at the hair sprouting from his earhole then banged the Bunsen burner again. With another plug of chalk he tapped on the board until the group came to order, and wrote a formula at the top: $\text{CH}_3\text{CH}_2\text{CH}_2\text{COOH}$.

“Ester,” he announced operatically and shook Esther Kaplan into attention.

Tinmann was explaining something about the secret structure of organic molecules which of course meant nothing to me. No molecule could help me. But I did notice that if you sounded out the syllables of his formula they worked pretty well as a background for “Just One Look” a new hit song by The Hollies. Suddenly the class made sense me and this insight must have shown on my face, perfectly misread by Tinmann.

“Mister Newman, I see the spark of recognition in your eyes.”

“Huh?”

“Wonderful to see. Isn’t that exciting, that moment of understanding when all these symbols suddenly click into place and have significance? No big mystery any more.”

“Absolutely, Doctor Tinmann.”

“Good for you Daniel, very good.”

And it was. I spent the rest of the class trying to work out the connections between various carboxylic acids and alcohols and phenols and the top ten hits. It worked pretty well too. Tinmann took my activity to reflect something excellent about himself and left me alone to my experimentation.

“Gimme U and R and M-A-S, and that’s what makes us Marasmus! Yay!”

I was mostly alone in the stands that afternoon watching the cheerleaders practice. Some old guy, a warty poppa, was there too and jiggled his thumb in the

direction of his daughter every time she cheered. But I, of course, was only seeing Sybil. She pulled up her socks, retwisted her skirt and bent over without folding at the knee, to pick up a paper pompom. Her hair and the hairy muff waved in the breeze.

“Veevo, vivo, veevo vivo vest...Marasmus, Marasmus, better than the rest!”

I shifted on the plank to avoid a butt splinter and watched the group drill. They no doubt had the grace of camels but that did not matter at all to me as they jumped up and pounced down. Patellas puckered, bellies jounced. Their brief skirts flew revealing white panties. Bobbing breasts, swinging hips, swaying hair.

Some kind of heaven.

“Who’s gonna win, who’s gonna win, who’s gonna win? We are!”

Sybil landed on one foot and overplayed a fall. Her feet seemed exquisitely oval, her hands as fine as a figurine’s. Her skin was a pure sandy shore and the curls that swished her forehead caught the light like foam on the perfect beach. The capital M on her wooly sweater swayed and buckled. She pushed her hair back over her shoulder with a cupped hand. The sun blinked. I could feel a chill on my ears but decided at that moment that I was in love with her. Not that I had such a good time with her; in fact there was a strange tension about all that. My efforts to relate to her were reduced to goony faces, double takes, high pitched squeaks. Otherwise we spent our time making out or talking about making out or not talking at all. Not that much fun actually but in a major insight I realized that in the quest for love fun might not be the point.

After practice was over, she changed into tight dungarees rolled up at the cuffs and white penny loafers, a mohair sweater, a red barrette, beige lipstick. This all struck me as being unbearably cute but when she asked me how she looked I just said:

“Okay.”

“Just okay?”

“Yep.”

“That’s all?”

“You look okay.”

She was sullen for the rest of the afternoon as we walked back to Marasmus, hardly looking at me, and would not tell me what was wrong. And I probably did not figure it out myself, which is sad. My intention was to appear less eager, less fawning. I thought that this might make me seem sexier or cooler. But the fact is that this ploy was a ridiculous mistake. Sybil did not think she was beautiful at all even though everyone else did. She did not grow up hearing it. Her brother never said it because he was just like her father and her father never said it because he thought guys were supposed to be mean to girls to get their respect.

The moment she left to go to class I was grabbed by some kid with a thick head and patent leather hair. He was wearing a plaid shirt underneath a baseball jacket, had a cigarette wedged over his ear, and a leather wrist strap under the elastic of the jacket cuff that told me he was one of The Saints.

“Yo! You Newman?”

“Huh?”

“You, y’little fuck. Daniel Newman, right?”

“Uh...”

“Don’t gimme that shit.”

“Um...”

“I’ll tell ya what I’m gonna do. I’m gonna break y’fuckin head, okay?”

He was much thicker than I was and when he grabbed the collar of my shirt and held me at arm’s length in a tight fist, I knew I would not be able to shake free.

“Lissen up y’little prick. You know who Billy Boyd is right? Right?”

“Uh-uh...”

“Y’fuckin around with his girl, you know that? Hah? You know that? Y’fuckin around with Sybil?”

“Eh...”

“Shut d’fuck up and speak when y’fuckin spoken, you little faggot. Now lissen and lissen good. You listenin’?”

“Ah...”

“You seer again, you go out wither, you talk to her, you fuckin think abouter, I come back and break y’fuckin head. Do you understand what I’m sayin’ to you?”

“Uh-uh...”

“Hah?”

“Uh...”

“You better understand cause I’m sick a this fuckin bullshit. I’m just dyin’ to break some fuckin little bastard’s head. Now get the fuck lost.”

And he released me like spit.

I walked home that day, I didn’t run. I took my time; I didn’t scurry. I looked straight ahead; I didn’t duck and weave. But only because I was ashamed to admit to myself that I was scared. When I got home though I locked all the locks and peered through the peephole for a good twenty minutes to make sure I was not being followed

That night, my mom had invited her brother, my Uncle Lou, for dinner.

Lou was the crazy guy in the neighborhood who I always tried avoid out on the Avenue as he wandered around trying to convince someone that he was right. Certifiable and certified, he had sent a letter to Franklin Roosevelt warning him that the army was sending Varishana radio rays through the toilet to mind control us. That landed him in Creedmore. Scaring the wits out of some unsuspecting lady near Bohacks got him fired from his job. Now he lived on his own and spent his time as the classic voice of doom on the street.

My mom made her famous meal of dry mashed potatoes, pale green beans, and bland chicken. For a long time I thought my mother was the only woman in the borough to have a chicken blander. I watched Lou stuff the food into his mouth, not once mentioning the radio waves. Good behavior for a meal. When we were done Lou plunked onto the couch in the living room with a magazine and my mom flipped on the TV.

“Do you have studying to do?” she asked as she pulled the antenna.

“No.

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

“Be careful about that. You don’t want to fall behind.”

“I will.”

Lou flicked through the pages of the magazine so quickly that he could not have been seeing the articles. He tore every single page in the exact same spot as he yanked it across, scowled at the rip, muttered, flinched. His tongue was hanging partially out of his mouth and his cheeks were as red as if they had been slapped.

“Does he know?” Lou suddenly asked.

“What’s that Lou?” my mom replied.

“Does he know what they did?”

“What who did Lou, what are you talking?”

“Does he know what they did?”

“Don’t start this all over again Lou. Nobody’s done anything.”

“Does he know?”

“Daniel doesn’t know what you’re talking about...and frankly neither do I.”

She was back in the kitchen transferring the dishes from the drying rack next to the sink to the shelves on the other side, moving much faster than necessary, and slamming the cabinet door. I noted that familiar tension in her face...the furled eyebrows, tight lips, extra muscles in her neck.

“Sure he should know,” Lou insisted as he turned the paper over and began again, making each tear worse this time through.

“What should he know? What should he know Lou, what? There’s nothing to know.”

“Sure he should know.”

“Why do you have to start this every time? Can’t we just have a nice dinner for a change? There’s nothing to know.”

“Sure he should know.”

“There’s nothing to know.”

“Sure he should know.”

“None of us can help you, Lou. You have to help yourself. So just stop the nonsense. What are you so angry about? Why don’t you tell me what’s making you so angry.”

“Sure he should know,” he said and by now he was ripping the magazine to shreds.

My mom shoved her hip against the silverware drawer as knives, forks, spoons, corn holders, and dessert forks rattled inside. The TV screen was showing a human figure charring and searing in a whirlwind of flame. Hard to make out at first, but you could just see the eyesockets, the chin, and an ear that told you this was a person in there. The silvery flames rose gracefully over that head, obscuring a cameramen who raced around the figure, still and stiff inside the inferno.

No one else was seeing this.

“Sure he should know. They send all that shit right up your goddamn ass...”

“Watch your language...”

“...then they tell you on television it’s all right and everything’s fine.”

“What are you talking about?”

“White and whiter and whitest.”

“Do you even know what you’re saying?”

“And all their bullshit.”

“Who Lou? Who does all this? Who’s they, Lou, who’s the they?”

“All of them! The generals and Clairon and the whatayacallit...KELLOGS!”

“Who are these people? Huh? How are they doing anything to you? Where are they? Are they in the oven? There’s no one in the oven Lou. Are they in the cabinets? No they’re not in the cabinets either. What about the fridge Lou do you think they’re hiding in the fridge? Are they in the refrigerator?”

As she said this she was racing around the kitchen opening each hiding place in turn then ramming the doors shut when no one emerged. I had never seen her move so fast, caught in the frenzy of scientific proof. I watched each test anxiously half expecting a hidden adversary to pop out and surprised when there was none. And that figure was still burning on the screen.

“Sure he should know. The bastards.”

“What are you upset about Lou. Because you lost the job? You stopped going in, Lou, what the hell do you expect? Of course they fired you.”

“They pull the goddamn food out of your mouth.”

“What food. It’s your own fault. Why did you stop taking the medication?”

“They make you take it.”

“You have to take it. It will make you better.”

“Sure he should know.”

“I can’t talk to you, you’re acting crazy.”

“They know what they’re doing.”

Then suddenly, as fast as TV, the man burning inside the fire was gone and in his place two cartoony girls were rubbing their fingers through some guy’s hair and singing “A little dab’ll do ya.” My mom, exhausted, sat down with a humph and began to methodically wipe the crumbs off the table. Her eyes were red and swollen and I thought about something I heard that the object of life is experience, to feel that we exist even in pain.

Even though I had no idea what Uncle Lou was talking about, I knew what he meant. That sense of being controlled, lied to, pummeled. In fact that moment of the burning man and my uncle’s rage made more sense to me about what the world was than all the books and words and classes in all of high school that year.

I had to get away, so I called Vinnie and asked him if I could come and sleep over. He said fine. I had never actually been to his house before and doubted that he had one. Vinnie always seemed to me to be too independent to have a place to go home to but sure enough he did. He lived in a four-story building with laundry on the firescape and no elevator, creaky stairs, busted bulbs, peeling paint, and a pileup of junk near the first landing. Not at all what I was used to.

It was a strange apartment too, without the familiar signs of family life...no rubber bands on the doorknobs, no hand towels in the bathroom. No rugs, vases, bone china ashtrays, cut glass bowls in a breakfront, enamel coasters. The walls of the apartment were covered with scribbles in ballpoint or pencil ...phone numbers, messages, quotes, quips, lists and reminders. Call Lennie and tell him to fuck off. The pissheads own the world. Read a portion of your Bible every day. IN-2-3285 or 6 or 7. Buy crackers (the cheap ones).

His parents were there and I was surprised at that too because he never mentioned them. He seemed in some way beyond parents. His mom, in black leotards torn on the thigh and a striped sack dress, was sitting at a table in the kitchen drinking espresso and reading a book of poems. The dishes were piled up in a sink full of roaches near her but she seemed unconcerned. Vinnie's dad was a balding man in jeans and undershirt who was guzzling a beer. He was busy writing something on the wall that read: The only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth.

"He gets in these moods," Vinnie explained as we went to his room in the back.

"My mom would kill me."

"It's all right, nobody knows what the fuck he's talkin' about anyway. He's kinda weird."

"What does he do?"

"Gets mad."

"No I mean...do."

"Tax," he said.

"He drives a taxi."

"Not taxi...tax. He's an accountant."

"Your father is an accountant? Far out."

"Yep."

"And your mother?"

"A mother."

"Cool."

In the bedroom with no shelf of knickknacks, chenille bedspread, vinyl lampshade or clock radio, Vinnie dragged out a crumpled and stained sheet from a drawer and threw it on the cot for me. For a pillow he stuffed some old clothes into a case.

"I think I'm never gonna get laid," I said as we settled in. "It's all I ever think about."

"Saul anyone ever thinks about."

"Really? You horny all the time?"

"Acourse. Everybody is."

"What about guys like Hugh Hefner. He must fuck 26 hours a day?"

"Acourse he's horny...that's why he's Hugh Hefner."

"At least you've done it."

"Doesn't matter. Then you think about doing it again that's all."

Vinnie was the only one in our group to have already gotten laid which made

him much older than the rest of us. In fact, I had seen it for myself. It was at a birthday party for his sister who was going out with an older man, a guy in his thirties. I was there with the Dingler and Vinnie was with his girlfriend Gina. I thought it would just be a dumb happy birthday thing but at some point his sister's boyfriend tacked a sheet to the wall and brought out a projector. Suddenly on the screen the legendary Candy Barr was being raped by four masked men.

We sat on the couch drinking cheap wine from the jug and eating potato chips from an upturned cowboy hat while Vinnie and Gina began making out on the floor. Soon they moved to the bedroom but left the door open and I watched as Gina's volcanic peaks slipped out of her shirt and as she reached down into Vinnie's dungarees. I watched them fucking to the sound of "He's So Fine" by the Chiffons. It was the first live sex I had ever seen and I studied it carefully from the technical side, memorizing the moves, trying to understand how it all worked.

I whacked off so intensely when I got home that night that my balls ached the next day.

"Doesn't Sybil want to?" he asked.

"Adonno, it never seems to happen."

"You gotta make it happen. She's not gonna do it for you, she's the girl."

"I know."

"If you're waitin' for a written invitation, forget about it. Ain't gonna happen."

"I know."

"Guys just want to get the tip wet, no matter how old they are, how fat, how rich, no matter what. The dick dictates. But girls are different. They're not horny all the time and they don't get it. They want relationships. They think guys are basically fuckin' dumb slobs."

"So why do they want relationships with us?"

"Because there's no one else."

"So what do I do?"

"To get into her pants?"

"Yeah."

"You gotta win her over first."

"What does that mean?"

"Figure out what she wants to hear and teller that. Gina thought she was stupid so I kept telling her how smart she was. 'Shit Gina, how'd you figure that out?' That kind of thing. And it wasn't easy cause she's about as dumb as they fuckin come. But after about four months, it worked. You gotta work at these things, not let them get you down."

Boxy shadows caused by car headlights on the street below slid smoothly across the walls of the room. A random ray flashed on Vinnie's face for a moment and I thought I detected a smirky grin. But the light slipped quickly away leaving Vinnie's head in shadow again. Did he believe all that or not? I remembered that when he and Gina split up, Vinnie wrote morbid poetry that he made everyone listen to and started smoking.

"Bullshit," I concluded.

“Acourse it’s bullshit. Saul bullshit. It’s just a matter of which bullshit you wanna, you know, eat.”

The room grew darker as I lay there on the dirty sheets and hoped that bugs were not crawling. The sounds from the street softened. And I thought of Echo floating somewhere up there in the night.

Echo was one of the early satellites at the dawn of the space race. Necker was gaga for them and made us all memorize their names. Cosmos, Explorer, Polyot, Tiros, Relay, Elecktron, Ranger, Zond...all up there in the high atmosphere, above the fray. Echo itself was just a big steely inflated ball in orbit above the earth; they were using it to bounce microwave signals for communication but I liked that idea, that sense of hovering, of suspension.

I had grown up in the atomic age, the era of the mushroom cloud, the duck and cover drills, the missile crisis, the fallout shelter. I knew – we all knew – with crude certainty that we would be roasted down to ash in the great final blast. But that still had not happened. We were still here and no one even talked much about the end of the world anymore. And here were these little gizmos designed by the same guys who made the bomb, drifting around the planet, bouncing signals, taking measures, twinkling.

One thing I understand from Necker’s class was that the universe was mostly empty. Limitless, busy, expanding; a dither of atoms always colliding, scurrying from one edge of a thing to another, whizzing and popping, never bored. Muons and pions and photons and neutrinos in all their charm and spin and anti-everything. Gas, some steam, debris.

But even so all of that was only a tiny portion of the whole. The rest was empty. Mostly it was all nothing out there and that made perfect sense to me. Not comforting, just true.

But there was Echo, still circling, doing what it did. And I was down there doing what I did and so maybe I felt some kind of connection to it. Some sense that our little efforts – rotating, bouncing, humming – might be just barely enough to overcome all that nothing at least for a little while.

CHAPTER SIX



Dearest Daniel,

I don't know where to start so I'll start in the middle. I'm sort of sleepy now so this is going to be a serious, normal letter. Prepare thyself! I get passionate when I'm sleepy. (That's not too good is it?)

I am absolutely and insanely jealous of Sybil. Horribly, rav-ingly so! I like you dammit!

A drowning man can save himself by grabbing hold of a ? Kaf-ka

I hate when people giggle incessantly and that's exactly what I did the other night. It's your own fault though if you wouldn't do such completely ridiculous things.

I just finished Goldmund by Hermann Hesse. It's a great book. The author's philosophy is that one must experience life in all its glory and suffering before one can attain any peace of mind on death. You should read it.

You ought to be flattered that I am writing to you in preference to someone else who I once loved passionately and also because I'm sitting in bed writing instead of doing my English homework.

They award the Nobel Prize in a couple of weeks. I hope Sartre wins it, he's a cool guy.

What difference does it make what I look like? Dostoevski was ugly and disfigured but he wrote about beauty. By the way my favorite names this week are Roxanne and Cybelle and Eric and Peter and as always Daniel.

Was this a serious letter? I don't even know and if I reread it I'll rip it up so I'll mail it without reading. Take care dear.

Love,
Candy

I was in the lounge reading that letter and hiding in plain sight. I figured that none of the Saints would attack me there with all those other students around. By that point, I was not so much scared as hurt. Like most teens I had devoted a lot of energy to being liked: mastered the quick response, the rhythm of idle chatter, the tone of eager concern, the friendly smile. I poked fun, made jokes, tried to be sincere and sensitive but not too sincere, not too sensitive. I ducked anger like the

plague. And yet here was this person – a whole gang of them – who wanted to kill me. That was more unsettling than anything else.

“Hear the latest about Brenda?”

“What latest.”

“Paul.”

“No! Paul.”

“Yes Paul!”

“You swear?”

“Swear on my mother.”

“Yuck! Swat’s the story?”

“He goes I’ve had it which you and she goes so I’ve had it which you too.”

“Boss! So?”

“So what?”

“So what happened?”

“They broke up.”

“Oh suffah!”

“You can say that again.”

In a moment of mud, I had mentioned Sybil in a letter to Candy so now she was on my case about her too. I thought about not seeing Sybil anymore but could not not bring myself to act on it. Billy Boyd would probably kill me anyway. I could confront the gang head on, full balls like Odysseus, and probably get the shit beaten out of me. Would Sybil find that romantic or idiotic? Or I could kill myself and save them the trouble.

“Hoy Gail. Hoy Marilyn.”

“Hoy Arlene.”

“Whattaya dune?”

“Fartin’ around.”

“Jagoda Phyllis’s party.”

“No, you?”

“No. I’m pissed at her.”

“So go anyways.”

“Oh puke!”

“Wasamatta?”

“I left my homework home.”

“So go home.”

“I gotta.”

“Damn straight.”

When the Dinger showed up, it saved me from my misery and all that earslop. He was telling me about a show he saw on television about Kennedy and the whole Cuban missile crisis.

“He was cool too. Good looking guy,” I said.

“And balls,” I added.

“The whole Cuban missile crisis and everything? Jesus!”

“Course he only had balls cause it worked out. If they hadn’t backed down everybody’d remember him as the biggest asshole in history.”

“No...there’d be nobody to remember anything so he couldn’t lose.”

“True true.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Hanging.”

“Why?”

“Thinking.”

“No shit.”

“Ever feel like you can’t get outta something you got yourself into?”

“Like what?”

“Some girl. You know? Like she’s tellin’ you she loves you and you’re tellin’ her you love her and all that, but you’re kinda sick of the whole thing.”

“Sybil?”

“And Candy too. I mean I want to get laid and all but is it really worth all this?”

“It was kinda weird when I was going out with Bonnie. She started calling me all the time and telling me she loved me and wanted to marry me and all that. It was getting to be a little too tight. Y’know?”

“That’s what I mean! So what did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“What happened?”

“She moved to Manhattan and started going out with some college guy.”

“Fuck.”

“You can say that again. Maybe you should drop ‘em.”

“Both of them?”

“Yeah.”

“How do I do that?”

“Beats the shit out a me.”

“Fuck.”

I had read somewhere in *Playboy* that women’s thighs were very sensitive, so later on at her home while Sybil was sitting on the floor reading a magazine I was rubbing her thigh, not delicately but as though polishing a table leg. My hand was even getting red hot from the corduroy. I was also playing with her hair with my other hand and thought we were getting somewhere when the doorbell chimed. Sybil put the book down and walked over to the peephole.

“Oh God!” she screamed in a raspy whisper, “it’s Billyboyd!”

I jumped up and rammed my shin on the glass coffee table.

“You’ve gotta hide!” she said and the doorbell dinged again. “Be right there!”

Sybil pushed me into the kitchenette but there was nowhere to go, then to the hall closet but it was full of brooms. In the bedroom she stuffed me into the closet and slammed the door. I could not see a thing but I heard her open the front door and say: “Oh hi Billy. What on earth are you doing here.”

“Seeing you,” he said.

“I thought I told you never to come here without calling me first. Huh?”

“You didn’t answer. Who you here with?”

“No one.”

“Yeah?”

“No one! What on earth made you think that? Don’t be funny. Cheese.”

I stood there among the flimsy dresses, shirts, scarves, standing on a pile of shoes. Hours seemed to pass during which I listened but heard nothing, smelled my own breath, envisioned my own death from suffocation. A slit of light from under the door slashed my ankles. Then the knob revolved and the door flew open.

“Cheese. Why are you still in there?”

“What happened?”

“Come out already. I thought you went to the bathroom or something. Cheese.”

“Is he...”

“He’s gone. Such a jerk I can’t believe it, I thought he’d never leave. Ugh.”

A nylon slip was clinging foolishly to my arm.

“I toll him I was alone but he didn’t believe me. He said he’d kill me if I was lying. And you too!”

“He knows about me?”

“Well, not you specifically. I had to let him in to prove it. Boy, I’m glad he didn’t take a look in that closet, aren’t you? He could’ve too, he was kinda snooping all over. I mean I’m not even going out with him anymore but he’s still jealous. Can you believe that? Were you scared?”

“Not really,” I fibbed.

“I’m not afraid of him anyway. He’s not really as tough as everyone says he is. Like I don’t think he ever really killed anybody, y’know? I think all that stuff is just a lotta bull.”

“Great.”

“Anyway I can’t stand him anymore. He’s always acting like that, like he’s John Wayne or something. I thought he was real sexy last year, like I was in love with him an everything, but I’ve grown up since then. That’s what I like about you... you’re nice.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Boy did you look funny in that closet with all my mother’s things. You could have dressed up in all her clothes and walked right out the door. But then he woulda probably tried to put the make on you.”

“Great.”

That time I really did bob and weave and run and make it alive all the way to the Prospect Park train station. I was relieved to see the guys there waiting for me. We were not street hoods like the Saints but if they found me at least I would have company going down.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Truss me.”

“Yeah, what’s the big secret, Vin?”

“A rumor but it might be interesting.”

I was spooked on the train, thinking that every stranger was Boyd. I thought about telling them all what had happened, first as a plea then as an anecdote and finally as a joke. But I realized that it would only make them as nervous as I was and so I did not to say a word about it.

The F train began in the bowels of the subway system and burst into the sunlight near Ninth Street on its way into Manhattan. At four o’clock the sun was already starting its wane over New Jersey and the skyscrapers in lower Manhattan glimmered orange and mauve. The rooftops stretched as far as the sunset and only a sign for Ex-Lax The Chocolated Laxative and another one for Meyer’s Tires broke the monotony.

At that point, as it streamed towards the buildings in the distance, the train passed over the Gowanus Canal, a thin waterway – or possibly open sewer – that carried the effluent of the factories in the middle of the borough out into the bay. The train trestle arched fantastically here just before it dipped back into the subterranean tunnel.

“What d’hell are we dune here anyway,” Herbie insisted.

“Yeah c’mon Vin. I got homework to do.”

“Will you boys settle down?” Vinnie said, looking at his watch. “It’s almost time.”

At one point on that train I realized that I was entirely surrounded by women. Smooth female hands gripped the pole above and below my own, one of them barely touching my thumb. A fat woman with a pocked face smiled at me when I looked at her. She had puffy lips, beige gums, crooked teeth. Next to her a ghostly pale girl with green wedges over her eyelids and a pointy nose twisted her face into a tense snit. There was a tall brunette with deep set eyes and fluffy eyebrows that met above her nose, and a cute chick touching a patch on her neck with a long red nail, and more. Mingling perfumes and skin scents befuddled my nose and made me sneeze.

In my mind I straightened up, cleared my throat, and made the following announcement:

“Ladies, excuse me please. May I have your attention? There has been a problem with the switching mechanism on the tracks. This train has been accidentally rerouted into an ice cave far below the city. There are sub-zero temperatures here. Please do not panic. There will not be any problem if you all follow my instructions carefully. On the count of three I want every one of you to take off all your clothes, drop them on the floor and huddle around me as closely as possible. Can you hear me in the back? Please hurry up, the temperature is already beginning to drop. Okay? That’s shoes, slippers, panties, everything! Ready? One...two...do you need help over there?”

“Hey jerko, get off the train,” Vinnie was shouting from the platform.

I was so preoccupied that I almost missed the stop and had to squeeze out

through the closing doors. Down on the street we found a crowd of other Maramsians gathered on a hill next to the waterway. It was an unsavory spot of dead weeds and abandoned buildings but there was also a sense of excitement in the air.

“He’s coming,” shouted someone from a nearby phone booth. “Two minutes.”

“Who? Who?” I hooted.

“Watch the train coming,” someone else said. “See it all the way up at Fourth Street?”

I could make it out at the far end of the elevated tracks and as it approached, the grumbling of the wheels got louder and tension mounted. Everyone on the hill stood up. As it made its way towards us I could see a figure standing on top of the very last car. It was a mere fleck of a shape, doused in red sun, hardly visible but as it continued to approach I could that it was some guy in a sleeveless shirt, green pants, and with tawny brown skin.

It was the legendary Chico.

The train pulled to a stop at Ninth Street up ahead of us and everyone stood up and watched Chico standing immobile atop the car, like a gladiator. As the train moved again, he crossed himself. The string of cars moaned, strained, and began their coaster roll down the trestle, picking up speed and fury as they arched towards the curve where we were all standing. Chico began running to the first car, leaping over the gaps from roof to roof, leaps that seemed to hold him in suspension over the subway cars. It was like a dance with Brooklyn as the backdrop and the F train as the stage.

The front car flashed over the Gowanus Canal, then the whole line screeched off to the left roaring over their mirror images in the water, ducking down into the earth. But when he reached a point on the train just before curve, Chico kept running straight and dashed right off into space. He seemed to be jogging on a thin spider wire in the sky, his body defying the laws of gravity and sanity. He was Superman and Spiderman and everyman in that moment and lived in a realm beyond Brooklyn where myths were born. Then he tucked into a ball, completed two full flips, opened out into an Olympic stretch and dove gracefully into the Gowanus Canal.

“Holy shit!” rippled through the crowd.

“Now wasn’t that worth missing homework for?” Vinnie asked us.

“What a fuckin’ pair of balls,” the Dinger concluded.

And I thought he was right. That was the secret. They were essential to becoming a man, to getting laid, to winning the game. To getting attention and even respect. You either had them or had to figure out how to get them. I was figuring furiously all the way home.

I told my mother the story of Chico on the train over dinner...some overcooked minute steaks with the pale peas. She was unimpressed and reminded me that stunts like that could end up as real tragedies. Her cousin Phil had fallen off a ledge while horsing around and cracked his skull.

"I want to ask you something," she said.

"Yuh?"

"I don't want you staying out so late at night. It's much too late for a boy your age."

"It's not that late."

"You're old enough to take care of yourself and not be foolish. You have to learn to take other people's feelings into account. You can't just do anything you want."

"Ma I'm sixteen."

"Fifteen. And twelve o'clock is much too late for you to be out on the streets until all hours. What do you do until twelve o'clock at night?"

"Nothin."

"What does that mean nothing. You don't do nothing and if you tell me you do nothing then I know you're lying."

"Adonno...we hang out."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothin'. Just hang out."

"It's hard enough for me to raise a young child without a father without me worrying about where you are and what you're doing all the time."

"I'm not doin' anything. Just hanging out with the guys."

"With that Vinnie? He's not the type of boy you should have as a friend anyway. Don't you see Warren Dingle any more?"

"Yeah, the Dingle."

"You ought to be old enough now to pick your friends carefully. And I don't like all these letters you get from this girl."

"Leave me alone already. I'm not doing anything."

"Don't you raise your voice to me. Don't you dare get angry at me when you're really only angry at yourself. Don't blame me if you're not careful."

"I'm very very careful."

"Don't get fresh with me young man. You think you can just do and say whatever you want and other people's feelings don't count. I'm not such a monster that you can't treat me like a decent human being."

And she went on like that for a while, making use of the dishtowel like a tissue. She reminded me about walking the floor with me as baby when my temperature would not go down and with no man to rely on and that this was the way I repaid her by being selfish and lazy and treating her like dirt and what kind of person was I and how had she failed as a mother and on and on.

I eventually went to the bathroom just to get away from the whole ordeal, sat on the floor and brooded. When the cold began to chill my backside, I flushed the toilet then raced into my room and closed the door.

That closed door was one of the things that drove her nuts; she said it meant that I was trying to shut her out. But I was not doing that at all; I was hiding. Hiding from all the whats and the wants and the wonts. Hiding from the words. Not just hers but the ones on TV too and on the radio. All those voices directing, tell-

ing, imploring, criticizing, complaining, deciding.

I was sick of all that and of myself too.

All my okays and yeahs and thanks and mayas and cans and I'll be right there, I'll try, I'll do what I can, do my best. The sorrys and very very sorrys. Not what I meant, whatever you say, it's fine with me, whatever you want, it's up to you, I don't know, I wish I could. Please, yessir, no ma'am.

There was this pair of scissors lying on the blotter on my desk, opened as far as they could go. Holding one blade stiffly in my left fist, I began to make short, sharp flicking stabs at my right wrist, aiming vaguely at the turquoise vein that pulsed near the fold. After a few seconds of that the area began to sting with welts that turned mulberry. But the skin refused to slice. So I gave up and threw the scissors at the bookcase where they landed perfectly in a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

I learned two things from that episode. One, that despair fades. If you left it alone, it dissipated like steam on a cold morning. And second, that there really was something in the universe duller than my dull existence and that was a dull pair of scissors.

There was comfort in both of those.

CHAPTER SEVEN



A slammed door woke me abruptly the next morning. This was my mother in the kitchen probably still mad at me. She did not let go of her hurt easily. Or it could have been her signal that I was sleeping too much. She took sleeping late as a sign of rudeness and used to walk heavy, rattle enamel pots, turn up the radio, or slam cabinet doors to shake me out of it. She left by the time I got up but there was another letter on the kitchen table. This one was open next to the envelope and it must have meant that she had read it.

I had seen Candy two more times, once at a party and the other at the park where we met one afternoon. Neither of those involved any hanky-panky but she loved holding my hand, which I did more out of politeness than passion. She had just I finished reading *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka which I had read the year before. The difference was that I had to and she decided to. But I pretended to draw much deeper understanding from it than I did.

The envelope was covered with notes and doodads and curlicues. She had written umumumumumumumum along the borders and daisy doodles on the corners. Across the lip she had written "Hello, I just felt like doodling here so I doodle," and on the inside of the envelope had a note written "Is innocence ever really lost? If so, where do we look first?"

Daniel

I like soulfulness. "Live while you live and then die and be done with it." John Gunther Jr. said that. Neat huh?

I have been trying to decide whether I like living or not. I love to walk when it's cold and windy and people can be so great but hurt each other so much. I found out (please don't tell anyone this) that this boy I was once 'in love' with had to get married because he got a girl pregnant. Then he left her.

And I know this other girl whose father is a Methodist minister. She went out a couple of times with this negro boy who is really great. Anyway her father had her committed to an insane asylum because of it. She made friends with her psychiatrist though and told him the story and after some tests had her dismissal papers signed.

After she got out the only friend she had was Robert (the negro boy) and so she married him. Her father thoroughly disinherited her and now they have a beautiful child, a girl with an olive com-

plexion, straight hair and huge black eyes. She got the best from both parents but prob'ly won't ever have any close friends. Such is human nature and good people.

Those and a couple of other strange things just about destroyed me. Why does God do things like that?

You know I never told anyone all of this and I feel kind of stupid now. Here I am on a silver platter in front of you. Oh forget it.

“I would rather suffer than be senseless.” Napoleon.

I guess I agree with that but sometimes I don't know. When Kennedy was shot I cried for two days. But why? It was meant to happen.

I've just reread what I wrote you and now have all kinds of apprehensions about mailing it. I suppose I've told you too much so if I do mail it understand that I was very upset last night and usually my letters reflect my moods.

Do you have any other close friends other than the Dinger and Vinnie (and on a hopeful/hopeless note) me? What colleges are you going to apply to next year? Did you cut your hair yet?

I keep writing because I think of things to say to you and never remember them when I see you. If you don't want to listen to all my crap tell me. I'll prob'ly hate you for a while and then try and find someone else with nice shoulders.

This letter is too long and you prob'ly won't read it all which actually might be an advantage.

I have a theory that god is actually a woman. Who else could take care of all the chores. What do you think?

Lookin forward to seeing you soon when we can play and have fun.

I LOVE YOU! with a purple passion.

Candy

On my detour to bump into Sybil accidentally, I was still thinking about that letter. Maybe my mom and the Dinger were right...two girls were too much even if I had no idea what was going on with either of them. But if I were going to drop one, it was surely going to be Candy. A friend was one thing but getting laid was far more important than that.

I was trying to decide just how to do that when I was ambushed. In fact all that thinking had narrowed my vision and that was exactly how Billy Boyd was able to get so close. He and his buddy were only a few feet away from me across some parked cars when I saw them. I took off like a shot and they chased me.

The streets that whizzed by were terribly empty, no one to call for help, no cars to jump into. No cops. I bolted down Church Avenue which seemed frozen in

time: shopkeepers still as dummies, leaden doors, paralyzed shoppers, dogs carved in stone. I turned the corner at Ocean Avenue and saw my two assailants splitting up to cut me off at the next block. Somewhere in the middle of the street I ducked into the hallway of an apartment building and jabbed at the intercom buzzers in the vestibule: Super's bell, 1-A Goldstein, 4-B Danzig, 2-B Ramirez. A voice creaked over the loudspeaker..."Helloh Aunt Sara is that you? Helloh?"

Billy Boyd and his henchman slid into view at the front of the building next to a row of hedges. They glared at me as I stood trapped between two sets of glass doors. They slowed their pace as they approached, fumbling around in their Saints' jackets for some lethal gadgets, grinning to each other, scanning for eyewitnesses.

Just as Billy Boyd placed his scarry hand on the handle to the outer door and loomed over me, the inside one opened and who should step out holding a small barbell but Chico Ramirez who defied gravity.

"Who's pressin' all the fuckin buzzers?" he said.

"Chico!" I shouted in the most brotherly way I could manage.

"Who the fuck are you?" he said.

But he was talking to Billy Boyd in the doorway who looked a lot more menacing than I did and was holding a knife in his hand.

"I'm gonna rip this motherfucker," he announced.

"You gonna rip nothing, you fuck."

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Chico jumped off the F train," I said proudly. "Great stunt. I saw it."

And I smiled at him but Chico looked back at me like dirt.

"Go back inside and mind your own business, Pablo," Boyd said.

"You pull a fuckin blade in my building and tell me to go inside?" Chico said, walking directly up to the taller fellow and standing way too close in his face. He was holding the barbell behind his back like a bat. "I will kick your fuckin ass across the street you piece of shit. Both of you. Now get the fuck out of my face."

Although I was standing behind him and could not see it, Chico tensed and glaring and holding a barbell must have been an amazing sight because Boyd and his pal backed down.

"We don't want no trouble witchew," he said, stepping back. We just want to slice this dickhead up."

Chico turned around to me with no greater concern that you would spy a fly.

"Why?" he asked.

"He's going out with Billy's girlfriend," the other kid explained.

Chico looked back at Billy Boyd in his leather gang jacket and holding that knife, then at me in my jeans and jacket and books and laughed out loud.

"Well I say good for the motherfucker. You can't hold onto your own girl, man, then she is free ass."

"Look man, this little faggot..." Boyd began but Chico cut him off dead.

"This little faggot is under my protection in my building, you dig? Now get the fuck out of here before you make me real mad."

"This little..."

“Yo, you hear what I said? I don’t tell you once more man.”

And they left.

I waited for a while then walked outside to make sure they were gone as Chico walked out with me. He could not have cared less about my safety, only about his own authority. But that was fine with me. He even autographed my notebook.

Home again I was sitting at my desk trying to come up with something to say to Candy to end the relationship. Something about being in love and commitment and being fair and true. Or maybe just about moving to Siberia. But then the phone rang and it was her.

“Boy it’s nice to hear a friendly voice,” she said. “I was just having a fight with good ole dad. He doesn’t want me wearing saddle shoes. He really gets me sometimes. I mean saddle shoes? Can you understand that?”

“Nope.”

“Anyway how are you?”

“Fine. You?”

“I had a dream about you that was real weird. I dreamt that we were at a party on this big yacht and there were all these famous people there and everything and I wanted to dance with you but you were mad at me and just walked away real angry. You’re not mad at me are you?”

“Me? Mad? No. But...”

“That’s a relief. Anyway then I started crying and all of a sudden guess who but President Kennedy comes over and puts his arm around me and says ‘Don’t worry he’s just off his rocker, he’ll be back.’ Crazy huh? I vunder vut zis meence.”

“Zex. Everyzing meence zex.”

“I like that, herr doctor, yah.”

“Lissen Candy, I need to talk to you about...”

“Remember that astrologer I told you I went to? She said I was gonna have a short life but I’d make a great contribution to humanity. I guess she meant my writing. D’you believe in the stars?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Yeah I’m never sure. Daniel?”

“Huh?”

“Lissen, the real reason I’m calling. My parents are going away next weekend. I gotta whisper they’re right in the next room. They’re going up to my cousin’s house upstate. So I was thinking would you like to sleep over next Friday night?”

“Sleep over?”

“Yeah we could have a pajama party. You know, pillow fights, scary stories, singing...”

“Sleep over,” I mulled and wondered if she knew what she was saying.

“You could tell your mom...”

“That I’m staying at Vinnie’s.”

“What do you think?”

“Well...” I said and wondered if I knew what she was saying.

“C’mon, it’ll be fun. I promise.”

Did this mean what I thought it meant? A sneak reprieve, a lapse in dull fate, slip of the celestial fist. Was I really going to finally...get it? Or was it just a dumb misunderstanding? Either way I decided to seize the moment, draw my sharpened sword so to speak, jump in.

“Okay. Sure,” I said.

At dinner I was mashing some of the peas into the potato when my mom sitting across the table from me, thought she heard a sound near the stove. As she twisted to look in the direction of the sound, she turned her face away from me so that all I could see was her rear profile. Only the tip of her nose was visible past the contour of her brow and cheek. It was another of those moments in which time seemed to freeze. Maybe the universe needed them to catch up with itself. Or maybe it was just me noticing.

Her eyelash tapped twice. A small mark near her jaw line sat on the muscle. There was a grey vein on her neck and another paler one branching from it. Her skin was thick and smooth, covered with a fine white hair and light red patches. Grainy, tough, loose, separated from the bone by a layer of fat.

There were no clear features from this angle...not a face, barely a profile. Just the rear side of her head where her coarse black hair waved over her ear and where one loose strand made an auburn shadow on the ridge of her cheek.

She was Ida Newman, my mother who bore me, raised me, worried about me, was probably still upset with me. And even though I could not see her face, I recognized other details...the quaver in her throat, the stiffness in her neck, the tension at the sides of her forehead, the strain of the looking and the not knowing what would be seen.

I wanted to reach out in that instant, reach out through the vast expanse of space between us. Two figures on opposite sides of a table or maybe the one between boys and their moms. I wanted to reach out and touch her cheek. In my imagination I could see my hand advancing, passing through rings of folded time, extending through the ether across the table, over the salt shaker with the dent in its tin cap, the china plates with steak and peas and carrots and potatoes, reach through the vacuum between us and touch her cheek.

To accomplish what? An apology? A connection? A moment out of whack with worry? I had no idea.

I imagined how it would feel, how the skin would dimple on contact, how the hairs would bend, and how the touch would ripple through space because each action affects all the rest.

But I could not do it. I could not bring himself to start and my fingers remained glued to the plate, curled and stiff.

I thought of all the times I had hugged her as a kid, her kid, and how she stiffened ever so slightly and turned her head to the side so that I had to lean minutely further than I intended. And all those ways she used to touch me...the primping of the hair, flipping of a collar, flecking of a speck, a tug here, a tamp there. Fussy

touching, being careful.

Now I wanted to forget all of that and to reach out and simply poke – one hand to one face – but could not bring myself to do it.

When she told me that my father had died, she clutched me so tight that it hurt. I remembered that because it was so unusual. She was crying as she said it and I cried too. Not so much because he was gone...I was a ten-year old boy and did not know how to believe it. And not because the house was filled with crying strangers but more because she had never held me like that that I could recall and it seemed to matter in some way.

When I became a teenager we became more distant, enemies on opposite sides of the life wars. She did not seem to understand my desires, my fears, my worries. And I certainly did not know hers. She was simply the mom who warned me, told me so, corrected me, and was hurt by me. She said we had become strangers living in the same home and I felt that too. But it was very far down on my list of things that had to be made better. And I would not have known how to fix it in any case.

Yet now, sitting there at that kitchen table, frozen in time, I saw her in a different light. For just that moment she was simply this rear profile, this other person over there. Not my mom at all but a woman with a curl of hair, an ear, a grey vein and her very own set of memories, worries, words, glints, apex of a generation and all that.

She was only who she was and nothing more. I suddenly saw that at another time, as stars died, she would not be there and at another time I too would not. And at all other times in between we would be different, changed and changing, and the distance between us would shift. But for now we were there in the way we were and that was all there was.

Somehow in that momentary trance, I no longer felt annoyed or moved or cursed or anything. So even though I could not lift my finger, I still tried to hold that moment in my mind. I tried to stay pinned to it, to keep it suspended, trap it in the present for as long as I could. As if I might dam the flow of minutes. But it was fragile, already starting to slip, and soon the inexorable flood of time began again and she started to turn back to the table.

Indistinguishably at first, she began to turn her head back and the contours became fluid again, shapes distorted and colors recast as she turned her head back in my direction and in this breaking of the spell, in this turning back, I knew all at once the untouchable sadness of time passing.

CHAPTER EIGHT



I knew something was up the moment I walked into class. Mrs. Read was sitting on the desk, not standing. She was not holding the book. She looked weary, as if she had been teaching high school English since before language, and her mouth was dry. Her words formed through a slit of lip that barely moved. I was thinking that she was going to call on someone right away so I was hiding behind the kid in front of me, carefully aligned myself with his outline, and only peeking out slightly.

“Boys and girls, I have an announcement to make to you this afternoon. For a number of reasons too complex to go into now, this will be my last term here at Marasmus High School. In point of fact, this will be my very last English class...”

She was probably hoping for sighs and moans but instead got a chorus of hoots and ho’s.

“I do hope that you have all learned one thing in my class this year...”

“How to take a nap,” someone whispered and we all laughed.

But not Read, who either did not hear that or chose not to.

“And that is not how to use a comma or to spell or even to parse...”

“Good thing,” someone else whispered but she pressed on.

“It is not even to understand the themes of *The Odyssey*...”

“What’s *The Odyssey*?” someone said.

“In the long run for most of you these things will not matter in the least...”

“Short run too.”

“But I do hope that you have learned one thing from me, even if just a little...”

“You can bet on it.”

“And that is a love of the English language, its beauty, its resonance...”

“Which language?”

Read kept at it, for once disregarding the boys in the back who were sitting as though they had just won something. When Lois, the studious girl in the white sleeveless shirt tearfully told them to stop, they tore tiny pieces out of the book and pelted her with spitballs.

Read ignored all of this. When she was all done with her speech she turned her back to the class, blew her nose and put the tissue neatly back in a pocket in her dress. When she turned around again there was no trace of emotion in her face, only the ancient stern mask from the months before.

“As a small departing gift to each of you, after 30 years of teaching, I have decided to give everyone in the class an A for the final grade. You boys in the back settle down!”

From my vantage point all I could see was a garden of ears...tubular ones, funnel shaped ones, prizewinners, bells, cupid's cups, bulbous grotesques. They gently swayed from side to side in the chilly air as everyone struggled to understand what had happened. Everyone from Lois on down to me was going to get an A. It was unfair, insane, impossible. But true. Homer was right, at least in the way I saw it. Fickle gods. They give a little, they take a little, they could not care less. But sometimes it all worked out in your favor.

And sometimes not.

I never found out how she found out but Sybil confronted me right after that English class with the full fury of a girl spurned. Perhaps it was the usual high school tattletelling or maybe I told her about Candy in an unguarded moment and she had been stewing about it. Maybe she somehow saw one of the letters. I never knew but however it happened, the gods were about to balance the scale again.

"You're going out with someone else?" she said, hands on hips.

"No. Not exactly," I said, hands in pockets.

"Well then who is Candy?"

"A friend."

"A girl friend?"

"No. I mean, I knower. That's all."

"That's not what I hear."

"Who told you that?"

"It doesn't matter. The point is you can't do that."

"I'm not doing anything. I never do anything."

"Well I'm not going to be lied to, Daniel."

"Candy is just someone who..."

"I don't wanna hear it!" she said and covered her ears. "It will just be more lies. I can't believe you would treat me this way. And after I was thinking of going all the way with you. Cheese!"

I started to tell the guys about all this the next day but the crowds were growing as we got closer to the entrance gate. The confusion of trading change for tickets and decoding the maps stopped me from finishing. I tried again when all four of us were lined up at urinals in the bathroom but Herbie's busted flush exploded the water all over his pants and interrupted me again. So I finally gave up.

We were at the World's Fair in Flushing, Queens and wandered around the grounds all that afternoon seeing the exhibits. Coke, Johnson's Wax, Ford, they all had pavilions there. We were hoisted into a huge egg and told that the earth was 320 quadrillion seconds old but the Dingler said that was old enough to know better. In another pavilion, images of modern life flashed across a mass of screens and we were asked whether the twentieth century would be known as the Age of the Atom or of the long chain molecule, the Nuclear Age or the Age of Plastic. Vinnie pretended to sleep and snore. In another auditorium, we revolved around a series of stages on which were displayed the nifty widgets and spindizzies of the coming era. We were told that mankind's greatest achievement was the idea of achieve-

ment but there we had to bop Herbie on the head for acting like a fool. Gliding by Michelangelo's Pieta on a moving tread, Vinnie headlocked me and gave me a nuggie. At the base of a large model of the earth we saw the inscription that said "Peace Through Understanding" but read it with mock solemnity.

It was all new and modern and sleek and smooth. Not at all like Brooklyn, like high school, like real life and so there was simply no way to understand it.

Later on, a bunch of girls – all cameras and kneesocks and speaking French – diverted us from the General Motors exhibit and back through a speech by an electric President Lincoln that we had already seen. Prodded by the others, I tried a few words on them but they looked at me like I was speaking Japanese instead.

"Marvin asked me to join Phi Delt the other day," the Dinger said. "He ask you?"

"Yeah," I said. "He asked everyone in the lounge crowd."

"Gonna join?"

"Me? Nah, I don't think so. You?"

"Maybe."

"A fraternity?" Vinnie said. "Are you sick? Frats are bullshit."

"Nobody asked me," Herbie said.

"Consider yourself lucky," Vinnie replied.

"It's good prep for college," the Dinger said. "We gotta starting thinking about that."

"Fuck college too," Vinnie said.

"So what are you gonna do then?"

"Join the Marines," Herbie suggested.

"God," the Dinger swooned. "What if the country goes to war and you have to defend us?"

"We'd be doomed," I said.

"I could get killed," Herbie added.

"Oh yeah. Well at least then we'd be safe."

By the time we left the fairgrounds it was night. We were walking down a promenade lined with flags and forsythia when we saw it. I noticed it first because it had become my habit to look up at the stars and think of the end of everything. It was hanging in the sky like a bauble, perfectly round, isolated, and bright.

And it was blue.

Blue as night over the deep dark sea. Nothing subtle about it; this was not a tinge of blue or a tint or tease or twinge. Not cyan or turquoise. It was a deep rich blue, Homer's blue, the blue of gems at the center of the earth.

"Look the fuck at that," I said.

"Holy shit. The moon is blue."

"It's a blue moon."

"I thought a blue moon was like the second full moon in a month or something," the Dinger said.

"What's causing it?" Vinnie asked.

“Voodoo,” Herbie said.

Other people leaving the fairgrounds had stopped to look at it too. The sky was clear, the stars were delicate, the air was warm, the lights of the World’s Fair were fading...and the moon was blue.

“It must mean something,” I said.

“Yeah,” Vinnie said. “The world is ending.”

“No,” said some guy walking by. “There was an explosion in Queens at a factory. It was on the radio. And it sent up all this blue dust crap. Its some gross stuff in the air.”

“It don’t look like dust,” Herbie said.

“It must mean something,” I repeated.

“Like what Einstein?”

Maybe that things changed, I thought, or that the unexpected could happen. Or that rare moments were worth taking notice of to prove that you were alive. Or that accidents happened and you had to be careful. But I really had no idea. A star near the moon blinked as the blue dust passed across it and I said:

“Suppose the sun goes out?”

“So yeah?” Vinnie asked.

“So what then?”

“I dunno, what then?”

“We find another one,” the Dinger suggested.

Outside the Fairgrounds we found a place to get a slice of pizza and a coke. I was waiting for the Dinger and Herbie to come back with the food and listening to a conversation between two women at the next table.

“Fuck that place.”

“You could say that again.”

“Fuck waitin’ on tables altogether.”

“Truly.”

“I’ll tell ya Toby, I’m sicken tired of it. I don’t wanna wait on tables my whole fuckin life. I wanna be somethin’ else now. I wanna work the register.”

“Yeah that’s a real good job.”

“You said it. Anyways, Richie comin’ over?”

“Yeah. My father says’ll kill me. What do I care, let’m. Servim fuckin right anyway.”

“You said it, girl.”

“Richie’s got a new car, boss as hell. An Impala. Never gets outta the thing. Anyways, I gotta get back. They dock me if I’m late.

“Me too.”

“So I’ll seeya layda?”

“Layda like when. You mean after?”

“Yeah I dunno...y’know?”

“Okay. Sounds good.”

“I’ll call ya, y’know, whenever.”

“Okay bye.”

“Yeah boy.”

“Bye.”

“Boy, boy.”

Then Vinnie punched me in the arm.

“Wha?” I asked.

“I said tomorrow night’s the big night right?”

“Oh yeah. I’m sleepin’ over at her house. But I’m at yours if my mom ever asks.”

“Here’s the thing,” he said handing me a small square packet.

“What’s this?”

“It’s the thing...the prophylastic you doofus.”

“Oh that.”

“You know how to use it right?”

“Use what?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m a little distracted is all.”

“Well you better get it together by tomorrow night if you want to finally get laid. You do, don’t you?”

“Acourse.”

“Then stop worrying, relax, and take it slow. You’re ripe to get an ulcer like my Uncle Bernie.”

“I know.”

“I never seen anybody worry so much. It’ll be fine.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you already did it. Did you worry about it beforehand?”

“The only thing’ll fuck it up is worrying about it. It’s like Kennedy said, the only thing you have to fear is fear itself?”

“And look what happened to him.”

“So what. At least he went down in history.”

I had showered, deodorized, groomed and primped. I had practiced getting a hard-on. Put on new underwear and socks. Checked for the condom. Before going down into the subway, I had stopped and had a slice of garlic pizza because Read once told us that the magical herb Hermes gave to Odysseus was garlic, a known aphrodisiac. Then I bought and gobbled peppermint mints.

As I walked down the long hallway to her apartment, I thought of her knobby knees parting slowly, my hand creeping up into her chubby crotch, her boobs like dunes. Was this really going to happen? And with Candy of all people? What if it didn’t work? What if I flopped like a wet noodle? Or what if it did and I had to marry her? What if she didn’t want to fuck at all but really planned to tell stories and pound me with a pillow?

As I stood at the door, the only line from *The Odyssey* that came to mind was: “Let this disaster come, it only makes one more.” The shock of the doorbell as I

pressed it made me think I had been electrocuted but the door simply opened revealing Candy all ears and dimples.

She was wearing a chocolate skirt and a pink shirt with long sleeves, a red scarf and two pink beads in her wide ears. Her hair had recently been scooped into a ponytail that made her jaw seem more prominent than usual. The flared skirt seductively hid the true width of her hips and the chestnut kneesocks disguised her thinnish calves, the penny loafers her bantam feet. Her skin looked pasty and dense like buttermilk in the harsh light of the hall as she leaned in and gave me a tonsillating kiss.

Inside she offered me soda, coffee, tea, orange juice, milk, liquor, anything. I had some water and as I drank it she held my other hand. We joked around for a while in the kitchen about good water, good glass, good grief, and so on while "It's All Over Now" by the Rolling Stones played. We chattered and bantered and sang along and all the while I could feel my sperm swimming around in circles.

"I have a little bad news," she finally said.

"Unh?"

"Well...I have my period."

"Oh."

"D'you mind? I mean does that bother you? Cause if it does that's okay with me, I understand. I hope it doesn't. Does it?"

"Period? Oh yeah, no. I mean I don't care if you don't."

"That's good cause I don't care if you don't. Also, as it turns out, my parents aren't going away for the weekend like they planned. They won't be back until really late but you can't really sleep over like we said."

"Oh."

"They're a big pain, but we can have the whole evening together anyway."

We started making out once she put a Johnny Mathis album on the hi-fi, then found ourselves in her parent's bedroom tripping over my pants as I tried to slip them over my shoes. Stark naked except for my underwear, I waited for Candy to return from the bathroom.

She made her entrance like a forest imp, suddenly appearing with a grin near the dresser. She was also undressed but had kept her kneesocks on. Her hair was loose; her cheeks were red; her pubic hair formed a scraggly heart as she stood leaning against the dresser with her legs crossed.

In one not very graceful maneuver she turned out the lights, tumbled into bed and began to touch me feverishly. I rubbed her flaccid thighs, kneaded the roll of fat over her pelvis, licked her tongue and pulled her against me.

"Gently m'dear," she cautioned, putting her hand on my back.

How can you expect me to be gentle with you when you've turned my friends into pigs, I thought.

I felt her nails dig into my biceps as I fondled the bumps on her behind. Then I ran my middle finger through the plashy slit in the middle of her bush. As I brushed her breasts with the tip of my nose I noticed that she smelled like donuts.

"Why don't you put the thing on, darlin'," she said and I sat at the edge of the

mattress and probed through my wallet for the condom, dropping change on the rug. I noticed that I was not as hard as I wanted to be and so grabbed my shank and gave it a no-nonsense yank while Candy ran her fingertips down my spine. Getting the condom in place and trying to unroll it was a ridiculous maneuver, like trying to get toothpaste back into the tube, but I pressed on anyway.

When I finally unrolled the rubbery sleeve, Johnny Mathis was singing “Chances Are.” I quickly, before anything went wrong, flopped on top of her and through some combination of faith, prayer, tenacity, brute force, ignorance, and luck or fate, fearfully and briefly made it to the gate. She flexed her calves over mine, pulled me closer, and I felt the head of my cock pushing through. Whether it was soft or wet or parched or coarse was impossible to judge through the condom but it did not matter. In that moment I had become not a man but a boy who no longer for ever and ever would wonder if I would ever get laid.

She closed her eyes, bit her lip, then bit mine, farted. The spongy skin on her neck stretched, her sweaty breasties jiggled, her toes curled, her clammy palms pressed in at my waist. Afterwards, not moving, not talking, not smoking, not knowing quite what to do, I rubbed her head. I meant to ask her if it had been okay but I was afraid of the answer and said nothing. The only sound was the scratching of the needle now that the record was over.

“Were you nervous,” she asked.

“I guess I was,” I confessed.

“Was this your first time?”

“Kinda.”

“Thought so.”

“Yours?”

“Oh no. But I’m glad I was there for yours.”

We stayed in the bed caressing, kissing, snorting and eating peanuts and raisins. The heat coming from her body warmed the sheets. She draped her arm across my chest, fell asleep for a while, snored slowly, scratched a dozy itch. I watched her the whole time wondering if I was in love now or ever, or would be the next day? Probably not. But I was starting to get a new idea about love anyway...that it was not something you were in or out of like the songs say. That was too simple. It was more a question of which kind and how much and when. Mommy love, puppy love, sexy love, buddy love, true love, momentary love, endless love. The love you have for a teacher you could never stand who suddenly gave you an A you did not deserve.

I told the guys about it but of course they only made fun of me. They had to, that was the way of the world then. But the Dingler secretly patted me on the back when no one was looking and I secretly prayed that he would be next.

Nothing much changed after that. No one looked at me differently or treated me better. The dull stayed dull, the white white, the teachers prattled on. My mom got over her annoyance with me until she picked it up again with full force about something or other.

In fact, my sense of accomplishment did not even change me all that much. After a day or so, it became past history and my worries and desires moved on to other things, other girls. I hardly saw Sybil at all and heard that she had gone back with Billy Boyd. Candy moved to another city the following month. A few more letters followed and then they dwindled to nothing too.

It seemed to me that a great ocean had been crossed only to find myself back at the exact same shore, knowing nothing, understanding less, confused as ever.

But one night I had strange new dream.

I dreamed deep into the future. I saw my distant self, an older and better self, the me I am now perhaps but even better. I was lying in bed with my true love, my wife, our bodies barely touching, her skin an echo outside mine, her hair billowing on the pillow.

The night, which is finite, curved around us, bent into a dome by the pull of heartbeats and dreams from which no one can escape at any velocity. It formed a velvet canopy above that was stuck through with zillions of tiny pinholes and through these the light of the outerverse peeked in. They seemed to glisten because nothing in this world or that one is perfect.

Glimmers, which we now know are alive and thrive in the intermediate air, shed their translucent skins, and these floated down and down and caught the rays and dazzled us. And in a like manner, so did the countless planets dance and the million suns stun. Eternities braided into this one possibility, so sweet that no laws could have predicted them.

And I knew, right then and there, that the most complete thing there ever was to know was the feeling of this feeling, this one moment all now as we held hands and I could smell the atmospheres drawn to her skin and hear her breathe through the gasps in my ears so gentle. And we were there then and right there and no one else was and then still together once the words flailed and there was silence under the night as the big dipper dipped at the edges of the expanding all-there-is and our hearts touched and in that instant for all time, there was nothing else, only the heat and the light, shimmer and simmering, the wanting to be touched beneath the spinning night, whirl without end amen.

I had no direction in that moment, no pause and no intent, no weight, no momentum...like a drifting bit of stellar dust that dreams of being light.

I knew what I knew and that was enough to be in love and loved. And I turned my head to my beloved and whispered nothing because that said it all. And I knew without thinking that this moment was only possible because of all that went before, no matter how hard.

Stars die alrighty.

But they are born just the same.

And that is why there are always one hundred billion stars.

And the funny thing about it is...not a single one of them is star-shaped.

About the Author

Alan Robbins is the Janet Estabrook Rogers Professor of Visual and Performing Arts at Kean University in New Jersey where he is also the director of The Design Center, producing unique publications, award-winning online exhibitions, and innovative products.

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His card, board, and computer games – including 25 mystery jigsaw puzzles – have fans nationwide and his cartoons, illustrations, photographs, and graphics have appeared in numerous publications. His channel on Youtube has over 9 million viewers.

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