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FINDING WILLIE, SAVING CHARLIE

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts of the City College of the City University of New York.

PART ONE, WILLIE

The commander-in-chief answers him while chasing a fly
Saying, "Death to all those who would whimper and cry"
And dropping a barbell he points to the sky
Saying, "The sun's not yellow, it's chicken"

--Bob Dylan,
Tombstone Blues

Down the road
Route 25
They found this boy
He was barely alive

--Peter, Paul and Mary
Jesus Is On The Wire

Before he is anything else, a man must be a man.

--Jay Jay

MONTREAL 1960

On a cold and windy day in January 1960, Jean-Louis Desjardins, 18 years old and scion of the Desjardins publishing empire, climbed the attic stairs to the roof of his parents' federal style mansion in the Town of Notre Dame, a Montreal suburb. The house was huge, two floors plus an attic with a sloping roof and little windows that peaked out. There were chimneys on either end of the roof and between them, a widow's walk, a long, narrow, fenced-in platform. The maid heard Jean-Louis clomping around on the roof and called out to him through one of the attic windows, "Jean-Louis, what are you doing up there?"

"I'm adjusting the TV antenna. There's some snow on my set."

"All right, but be very careful. It's very windy."

"I will."

Though it was windy and cold, the sun was brilliant and Jean-Louis watched a bus snaking up the Cote des Neiges hill, nearby. In the far distance, there were bare birch trees on Mount Royal looking like bleached crosses. Jean-Louis smiled as he watched the bus weaving through traffic, but then his mood suddenly changed and tears formed in his eyes. His eyes darted back and forth. He felt he was traveling deep inside himself. *Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses*, he whispered. *Give us this day our daily ...* Twice he began climbing over the widow's walk fence only to climb back. The third time, the wind made his decision for him. A gust caught him and he lost his footing, slipping down the sloping roof and plunging to the ground.

Jean-Louis was not around when school resumed after the Christmas holidays. After a couple of days, an announcement was read in class that Jean-Louis had fallen, broken his leg and suffered internal injuries when he accidentally slid off his roof while adjusting the TV antenna. Jean-Louis was in Room 914 of Royal Victoria Hospital and eager to receive visitors.

During lunch in the school cafeteria, Willie Goldstein, one of Jean-Louis's classmates, suggested that he and his friends Simon Shron and Ollie Moore visit that evening. Simon just shook his head. He hadn't spoken to Jean-Louis since they went skiing over the holidays. Ollie said he didn't know Jean-Louis well enough. Willie debated the matter with himself. *Is this really something I want to get involved in? The kids hate me enough as it is. If they find out about Jean-Louis, they'll think I'm a fifti, too, and it'll make things worse. On the other hand, things couldn't really get much worse. And if I don't go, I'm no better than Jay Jay.* So he went.

The hospital was on a hill above McGill University. Jean-Louis had a large private room with a window that overlooked the squat spires of the Montreal skyline. The lights of the Jacques Cartier Bridge twinkled in the distance. The room, decorated with posters of works by Picasso and Matisse, was dark except for a blue light over Jean-Louis's bed and the green graphs of medical monitors.

Jean-Louis' right leg was raised on a pulley and there was an IV in his arm. He looked smaller not completely human, as if he was a subject in a scientific experiment.

"You must be disgusted with me," Jean-Louis said when he saw Willie.

"What should I be disgusted about?" Willie asked.

"Didn't Simon tell you?" His voice trailed off.

"He gave me a few details," said Willie, trying to make it seem like no big thing.

"I don't think he told me everything."

“Well, he’ll have to tell you,” Jean-Louis said, starting to cry. “I can’t.”

There was an awkward silence while Jean-Louis recovered his composure. Finally Willie said, “Have you had many visitors?”

“Some. Not that many. The kids from school aren’t really sure what happened. They don’t know what to say.

“I broke the femur in my right leg,” he continued, lowering his voice. “I was fooling around on the roof trying to fix the antenna and I slipped. It was stupid. I should have called a repairman.”

Then, with tears again filling his eyes, he said, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to cause all this trouble.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. You didn’t do anything wrong,” Willie said, almost automatically.

Jean-Louis began to cry. “I was sure. I was so sure he loved me,” he said, sobbing. And those few words made it clear to Willie what an enormous thing Jean-Louis had done in stepping out of the shadows to reveal his secret.

“I told him we could live together without sex. I could get sex elsewhere.”

He became convulsed with sobs. Willie, though he instinctively shrank from the contact, put his arms around Jean-Louis and hugged him.

“My dad said they’re doing work at McGill that can fix this,” Jean-Louis said. “I’ll be cured. I’ll like girls -- I mean I do like girls. I can change.” Willie realized how difficult it must have been for Jean-Louis to tell his father.

Then, looking down and lowering his voice, the boy added, “I tried to end it. I know it was stupid now.”

As he spoke, his face drifted in and out of the blue light behind his bed, accenting the lines of his handsome face, which had a two-day growth of beard. The light gave him a look that was sometimes ghostly and sometimes like a death mask.

Willie tensed and his heart began to pound. *I guess I knew it and didn't know it. Hearing it is still a shock.*

“It’s no wonder that you feel bad about yourself when being masculine is pounded into your brain every second,” Willie said, starting to speak almost without realizing what he was saying. “But things aren’t hopeless. There’s a whole world outside Montreal -- New York, London, Paris. You’ll be able to find a place where you can live a full life. I feel the same way you do. I’m going to try to go to college in New York.”

“I’m going to begin therapy once I get out of the hospital,” Jean-Louis replied. “My dad’s arranged it,” But he looked like he didn’t believe it. He was clearly very depressed.

Willie felt drained when he left the hospital.

So this is the fifi, the person we’ve all been taught to hate, the boy who loves other boys. Funny, he doesn’t look any different. He looks just like Jean-Louis, the rich kid who’s my new pal. The friend I sing and play songs with. Now he’s saying that he wants to lie with another man, an act the Bible calls an abomination that should be punished by death. I’ve never met a fifi before. Fifis aren’t real. They’re people you make jokes about. It’s like air crashes or natural disasters. They happen to other people. They never happen to you.

Willie wondered where he found the words to tell Jean-Louis that things would get better. One thing he was certain of – though he could not tell you why – Jean-Louis

was not going to be cured of homosexuality. It wasn't an infection; you couldn't treat it with an antibiotic. *Ever awful.*

OCTOBER 1959

It was a Monday morning in early October 1959, four months before Jean-Louis' suicide attempt. It was cold and with an intense scent in the air of dead and dying leaves as Willie rushed to Town of Notre Dame High School. He had many choices. He could walk up Thornton Drive past the aging brown-brick electronics plant, turn right on Canora and then go across the footbridge over the train tracks from the distant suburbs. Or, he could turn right at Aberdare, turn left at the park, go up Simcoe and catch the bridge almost directly. It was a day of endless possibilities. He decided to go up Simcoe. Willie hated school. It meant another day when he would be treated like two cents. Another day when nobody would talk to him except Simon and Ollie. *Shit, I hope college isn't like this.* He began to sing to himself:

“I'm just a lonely boy
Lonely and blue
I'm all alone
With nothin' to do.”

He imagined the announcer saying in a basso profundo voice, “And that was a song by Canada's *own* Paul Anka.”

Willie was late because he had trouble waking up. It happened often. Was it because he didn't want to go to school? Reaching Simon's house, Willie noticed that his friend's firecracker of a beat-up, red Volkswagen Beetle was no longer sitting in the driveway. Simon and Ollie had left. They were mature young men now -- seniors.

Things were very different when they met as freshmen four years before. Willie remembered what it was like to go to school then:

Willie, fat as a tree trunk, was in his usual myopic fog. He was extremely near-sighted, but didn't put on his glasses when he walked to Notre Dame High because his eye doctor told him not to wear them all the time. Simon was playing imaginary basketball – dribbling, taking a shot and raising his fists in victory when he scored an imaginary basket. Ollie, who was over six feet tall and thin as a pole, bobbed up and down as he walked, like a giraffe or a seal bobbing for a fish. They made a remarkable – and unlikely – trio.

Suddenly, Simon shouted, "Squish," and body-checked the hapless Willie into Ollie.

"ASSHOLE," screamed a flustered Willie, lashing out at the nearest target and landing a punch in Ollie's midriff since he was unable to see exactly who or what he was hitting.

"Asshole yourself," shouted Ollie, screwing up his face and giving Willie a sharp punch on the shoulder.

Willie next tried to go after Simon, the other blurred figure in his field of vision, but Simon easily danced away. Simon, who was shorter than Willie and wiry, ran much faster than the fat boy, who got winded easily. So Willie went after Ollie again, whapping him in the stomach a second time and getting punched in the arm for his effort. Simon, meanwhile, doubled back and snapped a few fast jabs at Willie, laughing.

"Can't take a little squish, eh, fifi," he sneered.

The boys carried on like this for five blocks, until they reached the footbridge over the tracks to downtown Montreal, and Willie put on his glasses, signaling the end of the fistcuffs. You can't hit a man wearing glasses. The footbridge was a stone's throw from the school, a brick building somewhere between dingy yellow and sand. Mr. Doyle, the good assistant principal, was standing at the side door and shouting for the boys to hurry because the bell was about to ring.

Mr. Doyle was shouting now, jarring Willie into the moment. He began to run. Now that they were seniors and mature, he and his friends hardly every horsed around. Willie had brown hair parted on the left, brown eyes and horn-rimmed glasses. He lost a lot of weight as he got older, but he was still a little plump and a slow runner, meaning he was just so-so in sports. Simon was no longer short and wiry. He had grown a few inches and was about the same height as Willie. He was a very fast runner. Ollie was just an inch or two taller. He was a fast runner but not as fast as Simon.

After school, Willie, Simon and Ollie usually went to Vanier's coffee shop in the center of town. On the left, there was a counter with stools that spun around -- and kids would often spin each other around until the owner began to yell. On the right, there were booths. Creatures of habit, the boys would sit in the second booth unless it was taken. Willie and Simon usually ordered large Cokes and Ollie usually ordered a large Pepsi. The Sociables drank Pepsi; Ollie was a Sociable.

Sometimes, Simon ordered chocolate cake and tea. He fancied himself as something of an anglophile, perhaps as a result of his father's being stationed in England. If Ollie was hungry, he would order a ham and cheese sandwich, and if was really ravenous, he would have a hot chicken sandwich.

“Susie Darlin” was playing on the radio in the restaurant.

Oh-a Suzie Darlin,
I thought you knew.
You meant all the world to me.
All my dreams come true.

Slap, slap, slap of the chords.

Willie looked around the room. Kids were laughing and having fun. But he did not feel part of it. It was as if someone had built a fence around him that said “keep out.” He studied the faces of Simon and Ollie.

Simon had a square jaw, an upturned nose and brown hair that tumbled down over his forehead. He had an engaging smile. Simon was always Simon, never Sy. Unlike Willie, he was half-Jewish, but could easily have passed for a WASP. His Jewish father, who had a belly the size of a basketball, had been stationed in Britain during the Second World War and met and married a very attractive, auburn-haired French woman, who had fled Paris ahead of the Bosch. Simon had received instruction in both Judaism and Catholicism but followed neither. His religion was science. He wanted to become a physicist and so he decreed that everything must be questioned. Only that way could the truth be uncovered. In class, he shot up his hand and shouted, “Key-westion, key-westion,” to a chorus of groans.

Ollie had a round face that seemed too big for his thin body and his nose looked like a blob of modeling clay had been slapped on his puss. But it wasn't his clown face that made him stand out. It was that he was very feminine, a supreme violation of the first commandment of life at Notre Dame High School – be very, very MASCULINE (or be judged – shudder -- a fifi). Ollie smiled like a girl. He held his head to one side and gave people knowing looks like a girl. Most of his friends were girls. His best friend was

his mother. He punched like a girl, punching down like he was hitting something with a hammer. He threw like a girl – pushing the ball ahead instead of throwing. He adored Broadway musicals. He didn't know how to play sports and didn't care. There was no doubt Ollie was a fifi.

The word was a special Quebec term for a male homosexual, joining the more commonly used words like fairy, fruit, Nancy boy, pansy and queer. But it was used loosely and also meant any man who was the slightest bit effeminate. Men were supposed to have John Wayne's swaggering kind of masculinity – to be good with their fists and their cocks, to excel at sports, to pour gallons of drink down their gullets, to make sure their women knew who was boss -- and to be kind to little children and dogs.

Simon, the free thinker, had fully embraced this cult of masculinity and become a fifi fighter, taking it upon himself to reform Ollie. He sneered at his love of musicals and called him Puppy, the nickname Ollie's mother used.

Once, when the boys were hanging around in Simon's basement, Simon flew into a rage when he saw Ollie watching ballerinas on TV. "Look at that girl," he shouted. "He wants to get a skirt and dance around like the fairies."

Ollie, clearly ready to punch Simon, protested that he was looking at the ballerinas' legs.

"You were looking at their dresses," Simon sneered.

Ollie got up and walked out.

"I'm just trying to make a man out of him," Simon said. "It's for his own good."

Willie thought he, too, was a fifi because he was shy and wore horn-rimmed glasses, which made him look bookish. His curly brown hair was parted conservatively

on the left. Thus, he appeared mild-mannered and mild-mannered men were no better than women and definitely fifis. But if you passed him on the street, you would think he looked no different than a thousand other kids and you could never tell he was a Jew.

“Tragedy” was playing in the background.

You’re gone from me,
Oh, oh ... tragedy.

Kids began drifting out of Vanier’s. Some stopped to talk with Simon, ignoring Willie and Ollie. One of them was Jean-Louis. In addition to being wealthy and handsome, Jean-Louis was a superb swimmer, in training for the qualifying heats of the Canadian Olympic swim team. He could knife through water like a seal. He could hold his breath underwater for five minutes. He was also a great gymnast who could do amazing things on the parallel bars and could shinny up and down the ropes in the blink of an eye. His older brother, Gilles, who was studying in Europe, was also a champion athlete. Jean-Louis’s grandfather had begun the Desjardins publishing dynasty and it was expected he would join the company after college. Though the family spoke French at home, his parents had sent him to an English school so he would become perfectly bilingual. Jean-Louis was very popular and it improved Simon’s status that he stopped to talk to him.

“I didn’t know you were friends,” Willie said after Jean-Louis left.

“Sure,” Simon replied. “Got to spread my wings, boy. Meet new people and do new things. Get a new perspective. Can’t just hang around with the same old friends.”

Simon was fond of calling Willie “boy.” Also “dear boy” and “my dear boy.” It was another anglophile thing. Willie thought it only fitting that a man who wanted to hunt for subatomic particles should have a subatomic brain. He changed the subject.

“Have you called Eliane yet?” he asked.

There was a school dance in two weeks and Simon bragged that he was going to ask Eliane Rashid, who he always talked about. Eliane, who lived in neighboring Greektown, was an exotic beauty who had black hair, dark eyes and a fantastic figure. Her father was Palestinian and her mother French, the couple having met when her dad went to France to find work. She spoke with a French accent, which made her seem seductive. Her eyes, which said maybe, made her doubly so. “It’s the eyes, boy,” Simon said, explaining her appeal for him. *Yeah, sure, nothing to do with her terrific tits and ass.*

Few of the young lions at Notre Dame High asked her out, undoubtedly preferring their own, even if the girl had the face of a horse because of British ancestors. For Willie, she was doubly forbidden. Not only was she a shiksa, she was an Arab, the natural enemy of the Jew.

“I thought of calling her myself,” Willie said, “but my parents would have a cow if he I went out with her.”

Simon exploded. “It’s not what your parents think. It’s what you think that’s important,” he said. “Your parents aren’t going to be around forever. You’ve got to learn to think for yourself, stand up on your own two feet.”

Good old Daddy Simon. Trying to make a man out of me.

“So are you going to call her tonight?” Willie asked.

The coffee shop was nearly empty. “Roll Over Beethoven” was playing on the radio.

My heart's beatin' rhythm
And my soul keeps a-singin' the blues.

Roll over Beethoven and tell Chekoski the news.

Out of the corner of his eye, Willie saw Eliane, which was unusual because she hardly ever came to Vanier's. Just to play the devil, he waved to her and to his surprise, she walked over to their booth.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"Great," Willie said.

"Oh fine," said Ollie. Simon just nodded.

They chatted and then, holding up a heavy bundle of books and looking at Simon, Eliane asked, "Would any of you brave, young gentlemen like to walk me to the bus stop. These books are so heavy."

Without giving Simon a chance to speak, Willie piped up, "I'll do it."

"Good," Eliane said, and smiled at him.

Willie put on his coat. "Sure you won't join us, Simon?" he asked, turning the knife.

"You'll do just fine, boy," was the reply.

Willie picked up her books and walked her to the bus stop and then, they took the No. 16 to Jean Talon and Querbes in Greektown, about a mile from Willie's house.

Eliane pointed to the Café Select, a combination café and bakery, on the corner.

"I live above the café," she said. "Why don't you come in and have a coffee?"

The café had a glass display case in the back and eight small tables. Eliane guided Willie to a table by the window.

“This is my uncle’s café. From 4 to 6 in the afternoon, I am the waitress, a favor to my uncle. So if anyone comes in, I will have to serve them. What would you like? Have you ever had a cappuccino?”

Shy and on the verge of blushing, Willie shook his head.

“Bon. This will be the time to for you to try.” She went behind the counter and worked the levers of a machine with a long wand. There was a loud whooshing noise. She returned with two cups of coffee with caps of foam and a mille-feuille for them to share.

“Be careful. It is very hot and very strong,” she said.

Willie sipped the cappuccino. The foam tasted like vanilla ice cream and the coffee was much stronger than he was used to and bitter.

“Do you know why they call it cappuccino? After the hood worn by the Capuchin monks.”

Willie looked at Eliane as she sipped her coffee. She had shoulder-length, curly dark brown hair with hints of red, creamy skin and deep-set, saucy black eyes. She had red, almost pouting lips, and a wide mouth that quickly changed from a teasing smile to an exploding laugh. She’s really gorgeous, Willie thought. He felt an immediate connection.

When she realized Willie was looking at her, she held her head up and looked him in the eye as if she was posing, as if she was giving him the chance to get the full effect. I’m looking at a statue, he thought.

“It’s very nice of you to do this,” he said.

“It’s nothing. You were kind to carry my books.”

“You grew up in Paris?”

“Yes. Belleville. Nineteenth Arrondissement. Parc des Buttes Chaumont. You can see the Sacre-Coeur Basilica from the park. It looks like a collection of vanilla ice-cream cones. A lot of young couples with bébé live in the neighborhood. So do men who wear very tight jogging shorts. And a lot of Arabs live there, too. It’s quite poor. Do you know it?” she asked, momentarily looking sad.

“No. I’ve never been to Paris.”

“You should go. It’s beautiful. It’s very romantic. I might go back for college. You can come and visit me,” she said, inclining her head toward him.

“I’d love that, but my parents would never give me the money,” he said. “I want to go to college in New York, but my mother says we can’t afford it.”

“Work. Find a way to go,” she said. “It’s we who have to make a life for ourselves. Our parents shouldn’t do it for us.”

They took bites from the mille-feuille. He wanted to kiss her.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eyes and began to tease him. “You know I saw you looking at me in the chemistry lab last week, but you don’t speak.”

He turned red.

“I hardly talk to anyone besides Simon and Ollie,” he said.

“I like Simon,” she said. “Ollie not so much.”

She sold a loaf of bread to a customer and came and sat back down. “We just got the Joan Baez album,” she said. “Have you listened to it?”

Willie said he had never heard of Joan Baez. “Then I’ll play it for you.” She put the album on the café’s record player.

The River Jordan is chilly and cold,
It chills the body but not the soul,
All my trials Lord, soon be over.

“She has a voice like a bell,” Willie said. “A natural vibrato. It’s really beautiful.”

A man came out from the back and whispered something to Eliane. She made a face. “That’s my uncle,” she said. “He said to wrap this up because it’s 5:30 and people will start coming in on their way home.”

Willie stood up and took some money out of his pocket. She pushed his hand away. “You’ll treat me next time,” she said.

“How does it feel to have spent the afternoon with an Arab?” she asked, laughing.

“How does it feel to have spent the afternoon with a Jew?” he shot back.

“Touché,” she said.

She looked up at him.

Kiss her idiot, a voice in his head said. *At least kiss her on the cheek*. He was about to move closer when her uncle called out, “Eliane. Depeche-toi.”

“Au revoir,” he said.

“Au revoir,” she said, touching his arm.

Walking toward the bus, he closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them, he found he saw her face. *Cool, ever cool*.

As they drove to school the next morning, Willie told Simon he should have come to Eliane’s café.

“She served coffee with lots of foam,” he said. “It was delicious.”

“I’ve had it,” Simon grunted.

Undaunted, Willie pushed on.

“Did you call Eliane?” he asked.

“I did,” Simon replied.

“And what happened?”

“She said she was busy.”

They didn’t talk for the rest of the ride.

Second period was health, which was taught by Jay Jay, the gym teacher and Willie’s natural enemy. Jay Jay was six feet tall with a barrel chest and though he was in his 50s, he was strong and lithe. He could climb to the top of the ropes, swing on the horse and do somersaults as fast as any kid.

Jay Jay had sandy hair and a bushy horseshoe moustache that disguised the fact he had a wide mouth that hid two rows of small, cruel teeth, piranha teeth. He set the tone for masculinity at Notre Dame High. He called girls and women “dear.” He was the champion fifi fighter. He didn’t want no fifis in his class.

“Before he is anything else,” he would famously say, “a man must be a man.”

Jay Jay was married and had a son, but nobody had seen either boy or wife. Nobody seemed to know his last name, either. He was just Jay Jay. Willie amused himself by thinking that Jay Jay’s last name was also Jay, making his full name Jay Jay Jay. *He can fly, he’s Superman*, Willie thought.

Jay Jay always had his fists up ready for a fight. At the slightest suggestion of a challenge, he would lower his head like a bulldog and snarl, “Are you telling me . . .” He was the master of intimidation. Nobody wanted to tell Jay Jay anything.

Girls! Girls! Girls!”
“Listen up!”

Jay Jay had begun health class. Health was the most boring subject in the universe. The textbook must have been written in the 1930s. Willie remembered one amazing example of boys going on a hike (what else do red-blooded Canadian boys do when they have free time?). When they got hungry, they stopped at some greasy spoon – they only had \$2 to spend – but there were flies all over the place so they didn’t eat there. No, they knew better. Instead, they went to a grocery store where they bought milk, bread, apples and peanut butter for the \$2 and had a wholesome, healthy lunch. *Man, what a bunch of heroes*, Willie thought.

Fall, winter or spring, Jay Jay always started health class with some variation of “Girls.” Sometimes, it was, “Girls, girls, girls.” Sometimes, it was “Ladies” or “Ladies, Ladies, Ladies.” Then he famously repeated his “before he is anything else a man is a man” mantra and launched into his military career – “I was in the Air Force and when you’re in the Air Force ...” It was never clear if he had served in World War Two or the Korean War, had been a fighter pilot, served as a public information officer in Ottawa or had simply taught recruits physical fitness.

After ten minutes of talking about the Air Force, Jay Jay picked up the textbook and began reading about the heart but got confused between the right ventricle, the left ventricle, the pulmonary artery and the aorta. The left ventricle, he announced, connects to the pulmonary artery, which goes to the lungs. But he wasn’t certain of what he said – in fact, he had gotten the right and left ventricles reversed – and to hide the fact he didn’t know what he was talking about, even after so many years, he decided to pick on one of

the boys (the sexes had gym and health classes separately). His target today – as it was every day -- was Percy Walmsley, who had the unfortunate nickname of Sir Percival Lightbulb. Walmsley was tall and gangly and his head and neck really looked like a lightbulb – a small round head perched on a scrawny neck. To make things worse, he had a spindly chest. Who had given Walmsley the nickname Lightbulb was lost in the annals of time.

“What did I just say, Walmsley?” Jay Jay asked.

Walmsley, who had read the chapter and understood the workings of the heart, gave the right answer. “The right ventricle connects to the pulmonary artery, which goes to the lungs,” he said.

Jay Jay tensed imperceptibly. The boy could be right, but he wasn’t about to have his authority challenged. “No that’s wrong,” he said. “The left ventricle goes to the lungs.”

Walmsley began to stammer. He got red in the face and stared down at his shoes. Soon, there were snickers and whispers of “Mercy, Sir Percy” and “Grease Down, Sir Percy.”

“Aren’t I right, Lightbulb?” Jay Jay screamed at the hapless Walmsley. At this, Walmsley tried to protest about being called Lightbulb. This infuriated Jay Jay since there was nothing for him to do but get angrier and the rest of the class loved it.

“Stand up,” he ordered Walmsley.

“When I ask you a question, I expect an answer,” he yelled, getting red in the face himself, as Walmsley continued to stare at his shoes. In the background, there were guffaws and snickers and hands held to mouths. Tolson, a heavy jawed boy from

Greektown, leaned over to whisper something to Zaniecky, whose brother was rumored to be in jail. Others, though, seemed angry at Jay Jay and glared holes into their desks.

“I told you to read the chapter before you came in there – and you didn’t read the chapter,” Jay Jay screamed.

“I did read the chapter,” Walmsley replied weakly.

“Then what’s the answer,” Jay Jay shot back.

Walmsley began to repeat that the right ventricle went to the lungs, when Jay Jay interrupted, “That’s wrong. You didn’t do your work. I told you to read the chapter. You didn’t read the chapter.”

Walmsley had been on the gym teacher’s hit list for weeks. If he was lucky, the tirade would end there and Jay Jay would pick on another luckless boy – who by now had forgotten the question. If not, Jay Jay would make Walmsley stand in the corner or stay after class.

Today, he did neither of those things. Instead, he heaped the ultimate – and ridiculous -- indignity on the boy. “You think you’re bright because your name is Lightbulb. Well, I don’t think you’re bright at all,” he said.

Walmsley fought back tears as howls of laughter erupted from Tolson, Gick and Hoffmann, who had a beak of a nose and a Denis the Menace cowlick. Bulger, a studious boy who had impeccable social credentials because he was a brain at school and a star on the playing field, raised his hand.

“Sir, Walmsley is right,” he said. “The text book says the right ventricle goes to the lungs. The left ventricle goes to the aorta, which goes to the body.”

Jay Jay was trapped. The game was up. He began dancing as fast as he could.

“Well that’s true from the patient’s perspective,” he said, “but it’s not true from the doctor’s perspective. And it’s his perspective that counts. You don’t go to a doctor to examine yourself. He sees your right as his left.” A pause, then, “Anyway, let’s move on.”

This is the biggest load of bull shit I ever heard, thought Willie, who knew something about the heart because his mother had palpitations and he often had to take her to the doctor. The chambers of the heart don’t change names at the whim of a gym teacher, he thought.

At Vanier’s that afternoon, Willie complained about Jay Jay’s bullying to Simon and Ollie, vowing to speak up if it happened again.

“Don’t get involved,” Simon warned. “Let him fight his own battles.”

“Yes,” Ollie chimed in. “If you say something, Jay Jay will pick on you.”

Willie stared at his friends.

Changing the subject, Ollie said he had just gotten a copy of the LP of the musical *West Side Story* and would Simon and Willie like to come over and hear it. Willie agreed even though he thought the musical was silly -- a bunch of juvenile delinquents with knives dancing and singing. When they got to Ollie’s house, Ollie leaned closer to Willie and began singing one of the songs:

Boy, boy, crazy boy!
Stay loose, boy!
Breeze it, buzz it, easy does it.
Turn off the juice, boy!

Then he did a pirouette and stretched out his arms wide like he was doing a big finished. It was too much for Willie. “I dig it, daddy-o, but I got to go home and practice

my guitar.” As he walked away, he began singing “The Farmer and the Cowman” from *Oklahoma* using the silliest words he could think of:

The farmer and the cow should be friends,
The farmer and the cow should be friends,
One man likes to punch a cow,
The other likes to punch a plow,
But that’s no reason why they can’t be friends.

“It’s cowman, you idiot,” a furious Ollie screamed.

When he got home, Willie climbed the stairs to his room and turned on the Mike Stevens show on CJAD. The Everly Brothers were singing “Wake Up, Little Suzie” with that cool, tricky guitar intro the Everlies were known for.

Wake up, little Susie, wake up
Wake up, little Susie, wake up
We’ve both been sound asleep, wake up, little Susie, and weep ,
The movie’s over, it’s four o’clock, and we’re in trouble deep

When the song was over, Willie tried playing the intro on his guitar:

D,D,D,D,F,G,F,D. He had trouble switching quickly from the F chord to G chord and back to D. Even after he played it half a dozen times, he was still pretty slow. Nothing like Don and Phil. *Well, what are you going to do? They’ve been playing forever and they have two guitars. I have a \$23 Stella that has trouble staying in tune and sounds tinny. But I love it.*

The song on the radio changed to “Young Love” by Sonny James.

They say for every boy and girl,
There's just one love in this old world,
And I, I kn-ow, I, I, I've found mine.

Willie began playing the simple bass and chord accompaniment – bass note, chord, bass note, chord. He sang along with Sonny:

Young love (you're my love), first love (you're my love),
Filled with true devotion,
Young love, our love,
We share with deep emotion.

Then, he tried "All My Trials," the Joan Baez song he heard at Eliane's café:

If religion were a thing that money could buy,
The rich would live, the poor would die,
All my trials Lord, soon be over.

On the guitar, he played a bass string followed by a treble string, a bass string followed by a treble string. That's a beautiful song, he thought, I should learn it. Maybe I could play it for Eliane.

He had gotten the guitar to accompany himself when he sang because he fancied himself something of a singer. He imagined himself standing in a circle of light with all eyes on him. But quickly he became a better guitarist than singer. He could play the blues by pushing up on the strings. He was learning double thumbing, a difficult technique in which you played a bass part with your thumb and a melody with your fingers. He loved playing the guitar. The guitar was his friend unlike most other things in his life.

His mother brought up a Mae West, a small round chocolate-covered cake with a crème filling, and a cup of Nescafé, even though he repeatedly told her he could get things for himself. Still, he ate the cake and drank the coffee.

"Don't you have any homework to do?" she asked.

"I'll do my homework," he replied, rolling his eyes.

His mother hated his playing, viewing it as a threat to medical school. She called it strumbling, a combination of the words strum and stumble. "Strumble, strumble, strumble, strumble, strumble," she would mutter.

Ha ha ha ha, my mother made a joke, Willie thought. My mother has a great sense of humor. She laughs at least once a year.

Willie put away the guitar and sat down at his desk. He remembered how Jay Jay had bullied Walmsley and it made him angry all over again. I should have spoken up, he thought. Walmsley is me. We're both untouchables.

He couldn't decide which homework subject to start with, so he rummaged through his desk drawer for his journal and opened it to a parody of the cult of masculinity he had written many months earlier:

THE RULES OF A MAN

A man must always be strong. (drinking helps)

A man must never cry. (or else he's a fifi)

A man must have a strong handshake. (ditto)

A man must love sports. (ditto)

A man brings home the bacon and the woman fries it. (not right for Jews)

A man must be strong with his woman. (women like a strong man)

A man must hate literature and beauty. (or else he's a fifi)

A man must never let another man see him in a moment of weakness. (or else be judged a fifi, ditto)

Before he is anything else, a man must be a man. (the ravings of a homophobic bully)

(Compiled with the aid of the Canadian Institute to Fight Fifis.)

As ridiculous as the rules were, Willie knew that they were used to judge men. And he knew he was a fifi and would always be an outsider as long as the rules existed. Doubly so since he was a Jew. There was an invisible fence between him and the other kids now. He feared it would always be there and he would miss out on the good things and life would pass him by. He read a lot of psychology to help him cope with his feelings and thought it provided valuable insight into human nature.

The next afternoon, Simon went over to Jean-Louis's house, so after debating with himself for a while, Willie screwed up his courage and took the bus to the Café Select. Eliane was sitting behind the display case. Her face lit up when she saw him.

“Willie, que fait tu ici?” she said.

“I've come for your wonderful coffee.” Trembling voice.

“You've come for the coffee, you didn't come for me?”

“And a piece of chocolate cake.”

“Oh, so you want me *and* a piece of chocolate cake?” Mock frown.

“Yes.” Weak voice. “I'll pay for it.”

“Sit down. I'll bring it over.”

He sat down at one of the tables and she brought over a cappuccino and a piece of chocolate cake with two forks. “We'll share,” she said.

“I have something I want to discuss with you,” he said. *Translation: I needed an excuse to see you.*

“And you're willing to trust an Arab.” Mischievous eyes.

“Don't be silly. Besides, you're half-French. French women are supposed to dynamite in bed.”

“Don't get your hopes up.”

“Anyway, something bad happened in class yesterday – and I didn't speak up.”

“What happened?”

“Jay Jay bullied this kid Lightbulb very badly, made him cry. Lightbulb is a very easy target. He looks weird and he’s meek. He’ll never talk back. It’s so wrong to treat someone that way.”

“So why should you have spoken up?”

“Jay Jay is the worst person on earth. I can’t watch him do that to another student. I can’t tell you the number of times I was beaten up as a kid. And it wasn’t a question of fighting back. It was never a fair fight. There was always a group of them. It was never one on one. There was no way I could win.”

“So when you saw Jay Jay bullying Lightbulb, it reminded you of that and you got angry.”

“Yes, and I should have spoken up.”

“But if you speak up, Jay Jay will probably pick on you – or give you the strap.”

“That’s very true, but at least I’ll have done something.”

There was a pause. Eliane cut a piece of chocolate cake with her fork.

“I thought you were going to ask me about Simon,” she said.

“You told him you were busy.”

“Yes, I am seeing someone, Gerard – well, a little bit. He’s someone my parents know, but he’s much older than I am. He’s 27 and I think he would like to get married. But at the age of 18, I’m not ready to become a baby-making machine. At least wait until I’m out of college.”

“So are you going to the dance with him?”

“Also, I did not want to come between friends.”

“You wouldn’t have. Simon got there first. He’s been talking about you for weeks.”

“He took a long time to call.”

“He’s shy.”

“I was thinking maybe you might call.”

“If I took you to the dance, Simon would be very jealous and my mother would have a fit. You’re a shiksa as well as an Arab. But I’ll take you somewhere else. We could go to a movie. Or take a walk in my old neighborhood. It’s very pretty there.

“Sheeksa? What is sheek-sa?” she said, furrowing her brow.

“A woman who isn’t Jewish.”

“And you don’t care?”

“Do you care about the fact that I have horns?”

She laughed out loud.

“Does your mother control your life?” she said. “You don’t seem like the kind of person who would let someone control his life.”

“She’d like to dictate how I live my life,” he said. “She’d like to choose my wife.”

A woman wearing a kerchief and a tan coat walked into the café, smiled at Eliane and walked upstairs.

“That’s my mother. I think we better stop now.” She walked him to the door.

“Thank you for listening to me,” he said. “I needed someone to talk to.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Probably the thing I shouldn’t,” he said, looking into her dark eyes.

“Au revoir,” she said smiling -- and kissed him on both cheeks. *Ever fantastic.*

Willie lived in a gingerbread house with a peaked roof a few doors up from Manayunk Boulevard, which bisected the Town of Notre Dame.

You walked up six steps to a porch with rocking chairs that was a pleasant place to sit in summer. On the first floor, there was a living room, a dining room and a kitchen. When the Bubbee lived with them – she had died five years earlier -- they closed off the dining room with sliding doors that extended from the walls. His father made the kitchen table, which had a red Formica top and metal edging. The legs that had been cut down so Willie could sit comfortably as a child, but they hadn't been lengthened now that he had grown up, so he always found it uncomfortable to eat there.

The house had a finished basement and his father had a workshop there, retreating to it soon after finishing his dinner.

A flight of stairs by the front door led to the bedrooms. His parents' room faced the front; Willie's faced the back. Above the bedrooms was a small crawl space with windows that were opened in summer to cool the house. Once he shut his door, Willie felt a great sense of privacy since he was cut off from his father in the basement and his mother downstairs watching TV in the living room.

His room was a small rectangle painted white. On the far wall, between the two sides of the sloping roof, there was a window. Willie's bed was on the right side of the window and his desk was on the left. Because the ceiling sloped, he could touch it when he lay in bed. Opposite the bed there was an old sofa, but it was so uncomfortable – you could always feel the springs -- that he never sat on it. Instead, he piled his clothes and books there. School penants – and a copy of the McGill medical school application -- were tacked up on the walls.

The window looked out on the back yard, a 30- by 40-foot pen enclosed by hedges six feet high, like every other back yard on the street. But the pen had a lilac tree that Willie adored – and was the refuge of a friendly black and white cat – plus a bird feeder on a pole that was frequented by a magnificent red cardinal. From his perch on the second floor, Willie watched squirrels chasing each other and the cat menacing sparrows that disturbed its slumber. Now that winter was approaching, it got dark early and the lights were on in the houses across the yard. Willie could see people passing from one room to another; they looked like dolls.

Willie's mother was a tall woman with a sad expression who never wore makeup except when she visited the doctor or went to a wedding or bar mitzvah. She had gray curls that were so precisely arranged they looked like they had been hammered in place. Her cheeks sagged below her chin, making it look like she had the ears of a cocker spaniel.

Willie's father was a short, stocky man who slicked back his hair so he looked like a longshoreman. He worked in a textile plant in the suburb of Lachine, an hour-and-a-half trip by bus. The trip would have been 20 minutes by car, but his father insisted they couldn't afford one. So he took three buses morning and night. In winter, he complained of freezing his balls off waiting for the buses, but he never bought a car. He got home well after Willie and his mother had eaten dinner, finished quickly and retreated to the basement.

His father was a tightwad, decreeing that teabags should be reused and installing a glass by the kitchen stove to collect them. "It's good enough," he maintained. Willie tried one, the tea tasted like cabbage and dumped it in the sink.

His father's greatest joy was having his own home. If Willie ever asked if the family could go out for dinner, his father would say, dismissively, "We have food in the house."

If Willie ever suggested they buy a new tool, his father would reply, "We have tools in the house," smiling with pride.

"Can we? ..." "We have that in the house."

"Do we? ..." "That's in the house."

In addition to the "We Have That in the House" game, his father also played the "Do You Think You'll Find It In the Street?" game.

Willie: "Dad, could I borrow \$10?"

Father: "Do you think you'll find it in the street?"

I need new clothes: "Do you think you'll find them in the street?"

Can we get a cat? "Go find one on the street?"

His home was his castle, a stronghold to protect him from the jungle that was the outside world. Willie imagined his father as the lone defender of a small fort, tramping the parapet of the watchtower with a blunderbuss and scythe, ready to sound the alarm should there appear an attacker with a bow and arrows -- or a dog seeking to do his duty.

Instead of chainmail armor, his father wore his baseball cap, an old windbreaker of indeterminate color, perhaps dark blue, an old sweater, light brown, and old shiny pants, perhaps dark brown. He had come to Montreal from New York just before the Second World War and spoke with a heavy Brooklyn accent. He had been a teacher in New York, but in Montreal, he worked unhappily as an office manager in one of the Jewish textile factories. Willie never understood why. But even though his father wasn't

in the classroom, he spoke like a teacher, splitting words into their syllables as if he was making it easier for a student to understand. For example, BEE-ah (beer), MUTH-ah (mother), DOLL-ah (dollar).

His father constantly cried poor, perhaps to convince Willie of the need to earn lots of dough so he could have a much bigger house and impress the burghers of the Town of Notre Dame. “You see how hard it is for us,” his father would say over and over again. But Willie did not see. And he wondered why, if it was so hard for them, they had moved to the Town of Notre Dame, one of the richest suburbs in Canada. Also, if they were so poor, why didn’t his mother work? Ollie’s mother worked and his family was much richer than Willie’s -- they owned a boat. It seemed like the answers were family secrets. Willie found it very strange that they didn’t trust him since he was an only child and they were constantly telling him how much they loved him.

Diagonally across the street was an identical abode, that of Aunt Beryl and Uncle Barney, his mother’s sister and half-wit brother-in-law. The couple had two teenage girls, one who squinted and one who was cross-eyed. Willie called them the Uglypusses, much to the chagrin of his mother. Barney was a man with curly black hair who had a face full of bumps as if he had just been walloped in a fistfight. Willie called him Uncle Bumpy. Bumpy was a man in a hurry, a man on the move. He would often visit Willie’s mother in the afternoon, but no sooner had he arrived than he would say, “I can’t stay long. I can’t stay long.” After they chatted for a few minutes, Bumpy would get up and say, “I gotta go. I gotta go.” Since Bumpy did not appear to have a job, Willie wondered where he went and one day, he followed him. Bumpy went back to the house diagonally across the street.

On the way to his locker the next day, Willie bumped into the fat little rich kid, Jerry Angelov, another of the eight Jews in the school. Jerry was short and looked like two footballs – a small football that had been placed atop a large football. His black hair, perched on his pointy little head, was wild and unruly and looked like a nest of hissing snakes. His parents were reputed to be fabulously wealthy – his father ran some sort of investment fund -- and Jerry lived in a house that looked like an 18th-century mansion. It was surrounded by a brick fence and had a gated driveway.

Jerry was a believer in the I-can-get-it-wholesale theory of life. Whatever you wanted to buy, Jerry could get it for you cheaper. He produced a Canon P Rangefinder camera.

“Like this camera?” he asked. “It goes for \$300 list. I got it for \$200. I can get the same deal for you.”

Willie looked at the camera. “It’s nice,” he said, handing it back, “but I can’t afford \$200.”

“Would you be willing to pay \$175?” Jerry asked. Willie started to walk away.

“A hundred and fifty?” Jerry called back. “Would you go for \$150?”

A real pusherke, thought Willie.

Second period was English. The class had begun reading “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.” The teacher was Mrs. Honey, a tall, pompous British woman in her 50s who wore a maroon half-jacket over a green dress. She had a large nose that gave her the profile of Cyrano, a high voice and a habit of repeating things. For example, “Joyce uses what we call stream of consciousness, stream of consciousness, which is like a river that flows from one image to the next.”

She explained how Stephen Dedalus got his name.

“Daedalus and his son, Icarus, were imprisoned in the Labyrinth,” she said. “To escape, Daedalus built wings from feathers and wax. He warned Icarus not to fly too high lest the sun melt the wax. Daedalus escaped, but Icarus didn’t listen to his father and flew too high. The wax melted and he fell into the sea and died. Stephen is like Daedalus. He’s trying to escape his middle-class surroundings into a world of art.”

The class found it hard to stay awake. Mrs. Honey had already explained this twice before. She obviously was a believer in the modern educational theory that repetition – over and over and over -- was the key to learning. Gooch, sitting in the next row, was drawing little planes and guns in the margins of his exercise book. Others had their heads down on their desks. Mrs. Honey didn’t seem to notice. At the mention of escaping, Willie slipped into his favorite fantasy, leaving middle-class Montreal and going to college in New York, where you had to look up and up at the impossibly tall buildings. He planned to apply to New York University and Columbia, though it was doubtful he would get into Columbia. Even if he got into NYU, his parents would probably insist they couldn’t afford it. But a boy could dream. After all, Ollie was going to go to Dalhousie, in Halifax, his father’s school.

Willie would probably end up at McGill, which was worshipped by Montreal’s Jewish community. In fact, his mother would look up to the sky whenever the school’s name was mentioned. Graduation from its highly regarded medical school – which had a 10 percent quota for Jews – was the gateway to a comfortable, middle-class life. Not only would you be set for life, but you would be your own boss – and what Jew could ever have a boss?

Willie was thinking about this when the recess bell rang. He leaned against the lockers on either side of the hall and watched the other kids talking and laughing.

After recess, the teacher was Mr. Tuttle, another Brit, who taught social studies. Just as he walked in the door, there were whispers of tut-tut-tut, tut-tut-tut from the peanut gallery. Mr. Tuttle, famous for pronouncing Mao Tse Tung “mousey dung,” was older than Methuselah. He had a small face that was always pointed up, a small mouth with a flickering tongue and squinty eyes that always looked down. His face and neck were so deeply seamed that they looked like the folds of a curtain. He wore a light tan tweed jacket that had patches at the elbows. He sometimes dyed his sparse grey hair red. *Weird.*

Mr. Tuttle usually began with a digression that often lasted the full period. Today, he picked up where Mrs. Honey had left off about Daedalus and Icarus, but with his own twist.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, there’s an important lesson in the Daedalus myth,” he said. “Man can’t fly, only birds can fly. So to try to fly is to commit the sin of pride – to want to be like God. Now, Man can’t be like God. Only God can be like God. So Man must pay the price for trying to be like God. And you see that in Daedalus and Icarus. Icarus flies too close to the sun. His wings melt and he dies. So there’s a lesson in that. There *is* punishment for pride.”

That was the exact opposite of what Mrs. Honey had said – that Stephen was trying to escape his middle-class life, to do something extraordinary, not try to be like God.

Mr. Tuttle used the Icarus tale to segue into his tired, often-repeated refrain:

“The average man is the happy man. The world is not made for the man who stands out, the man who questions, the man who wants to change the world. He will never be happy because nothing will be ever good enough for him. No, the happy man is he who accepts life’s limitations, who likes his Nescafe with cream and sugar, who is happy when his shirts come back starched and white. The average man has many blessings, he has his pub, he has his pint, he has his telly and he has his tabloid newspapers.”

I don’t have much choice, do I? Willie thought. If I try to escape middle-class life, I’ll crash to the ground and end up being average. So why try?

Jay Jay never missed a chance to fight fifis, which was rammed home to Willie during health the next day. This time, Jay Jay didn’t pick on Walmsley. Instead, he began ragging Marccione, who had missed a free throw during basketball practice.

“You’ve got to try harder, Marccione,” Jay Jay said. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

Marccione stood his ground.

“I do take it seriously,” he said. “I practice two hours a day. I just screwed up one lousy foul.”

“One *lousy* foul. One *lousy* foul. One lousy foul could cost us the whole game,” Jay Jay shot back, his voice rising. “Don’t you realize that?”

He shook his head. “You guys are soft,” he said.

His eyes raked the class members individually, like a rifleman looking for a target, and then he launched into his famous manhood speech. “I know you people don’t

like hearing this, but it's true," he said. "Before he is anything else, a man must be a man. You're getting older and soon, you're going to go out in the world, you're going out in that jungle and you're going to be judged. And masculinity is the thing you're going to be judged on. The way you walk, the way you shake hands, the way you smile, the way you hold your head, the way you look people in the eye, they all add up to how you are judged as a man.

"They don't like me using this word," he went on, "but nobody likes a fifi. You carry a limp wrist or have a limp fish for a handshake and you're dead. You'll never get anywhere. It's not me saying this. That's the way the world is. I didn't make the rules. I'm just telling you what they are."

Men were expected to be apostles and warriors for masculinity, to actively reject – and even beat up -- the fifi to strengthen their bonds as men. This was merely justification to behave like a bully. Willie had recently read "Understanding Human Nature" by the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler. For Adler, the prime human motivational force was to overcome inferiority and achieve superiority. He believed that men overcompensated for any feminine feelings, regarding them as weakness. "The arch evil of our culture," he said, is "the excessive pre-eminence of manliness." *I should buy this book for Jay Jay, Willie thought.*

After school, Willie took his mother to the Medical Arts Building on stately Sherbrooke Street to see her cardiologist. He said it would be more appropriate for his father to take his mother, but his father protested. "I'll have to take off time from work." Willie knew that his mother suffered from palpitations and high blood pressure, but he also knew that she was a collection of ailments, in other

words a hypochondriac. The problem today was that her palpitations were getting worse. “There’s a flutter in my heart. I can hear it,” she said, wide-eyed. Willie did not understand how her ears could act as a stethoscope..

The cardiologist, Dr. Ash, was a short man with a receding hair line, a brushy moustache and a tan. He greeted Mrs. Goldstein warmly and ushered her into her office. Willie sat in the waiting room for what seemed to be forever. A woman with a thin face and close-set eyes was using the receptionist’s phone, talking loudly. “Yes, there’s less pain, but there’s still pain. There’s pain when I stand up. There’s pain when I move my left arm. Yes, there’s less pain, but there shouldn’t be any pain at all. There’s got to be a blockage somewhere, but it doesn’t show up on the tests.” *This woman should be shot immediately, Willie thought.* Finally, the door opened and the doctor and Mrs. Goldstein came out.

“She’s fine,” he said. “I’ve increased her Inderal. It should take care of the palpitations. It could just be anxiety. She’s feeling the palpitations more intensely because she’s a little anxious.”

He shook Willie’s hand and took the next patient into his office.

“Inderal,” Willie said, just to be mischievous.

“I thought you hated Inderal. You said it always makes you tired.”

“I do hate Inderal,” his mother replied, getting agitated. “I told the doctor that, but he didn’t listen.”

“Why didn’t you ask for another drug?” Willie asked.

“I *did* ask for another drug,” his mother said, her voice rising. “But he said they’re all the same. They all make you tired.”

Willie, smiling slyly to himself, let the matter drop.

“He just got back from a cruise to Guadeloupe in the Caribbean,” his mother said as they waited for the bus. “It’s very French. He said it was lovely.”

Willie nodded.

“That’s the life you have when you’re a doctor,” she said. “Zey leb, zey leb.”

Aha, a woman of the people, Willie thought.

“What does that mean?” he said.

“You don’t know your Yiddish,” she said indignantly. “Didn’t you learn anything in Hebrew school.”

“They didn’t teach Yiddish in Hebrew school. They taught Hebrew, remember?”

“Well, they should have taught you Yiddish,” getting red and stamping her foot.

“Any way, it means ‘they live.’ You have a very good life when you’re a doctor. You work hard – you study hard – for a few years and then you’re set for life. You want to take a cruise, you take a cruise. You don’t have to grovel before a boss.”

“The sight of blood makes me want to throw up.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“Set for life sounds like being set in concrete,” Willie said sarcastically. “You really don’t make it sound very appealing.”

“I go to school for seven years, then I get married and move to the suburbs so my children can have a good home and then I sit back and watch my children grow up so they can repeat the process. There must be something more to life than this. Where’s the excitement?”

Where's the spontaneity? It sounds like death on the installment plan. It doesn't make sense to me."

"I makes sense to boys who have sense," she replied, pursing her lips and shaking her head up and down.

After ignoring Willie and Ollie for several weeks, Jean-Louis invited the two boys and Simon to his house on Friday afternoon. He lived in the ritzy western part of the town, in a huge colonial home built on ground that extended to the street in back. The home was two stories high plus an attic and was painted yellow and white with black shutters. The front door was in the center. There was a garage on the right side and a sun porch on the left. There were chimneys on either end of the house and between the chimneys, there was a long narrow fenced-in platform on the roof called a widow's walk.

Huge maple trees were planted in the back yard, which Willie thought was half the size of a football field, and there was a pool. The family had three dogs, four cats and a llama, which was kept in a shed. Jean-Louis showed them the house. In the basement, there was a small gym, where Jean-Louis and his brother, Gilles, now studying in Europe, worked out. The vast living room had red velvet sofas and wing chairs grouped around an ebony coffee table. A fire was smoldering in the fireplace. Upstairs, Jean-Louis essentially had a two-room suite -- a bedroom and a small sitting room where there was hi-fi equipment Willie could only dream of owning: JBL L100 speakers like the ones in the ad where a kid, lying in front of a speaker, is being blown away by the sound; a Marantz 100-watt receiver and an Acoustic Research turntable with a Shure V15 cartridge. In one corner, there was a Stratocaster electric guitar.

This house is what money can buy, Willie thought. This is what my parents and my relatives have wished for all their lives. They would bow down and kiss the ground if they saw this. This is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Jean-Louis got his football and they went out to toss it around. Willie tossed good long passes to Simon and Jean-Louis. Simon was fast, but Jean-Louis was even faster and ran with longer strides. Willie could see how powerful his legs were. Ollie tried to throw a pass, but threw it into the ground. He sat down on the grass.

When they got tired, Willie asked Jean-Louis if he could hear something on his hi-fi set. Jean-Louis put on “Take Five” by Dave Brubeck. He explained that the song was written in five-fourths time by Paul Desmond, who played alto saxophone in a particularly mellow way, and the drum player, Joe Morello, was known for his rhythmic experiments. The music began. Da-da-da-da-da-da-dum-boom-boom. Willie could hear each of the four instruments clearly, could hear the plucking of the bass, could feel its notes on his body. Desmond’s saxophone was liquid. Morello’s drum solos were off the beat but very clever. It was like he was playing a song with a drum.

When the song finished, Willie asked if he could try the Stratocaster, a guitar he had always wanted to play. Jean-Louis picked it up and plugged it into a small amp. Willie began to play the intro to “Wake Up Little Susie” – D ,D, D, D, F, G, F, D. “What would be good,” he said, “would be to have two guitars. Then we could make it sound like the Everlies.”

“My brother’s got one in his room. I’ll go get it.” He returned with a beat-up acoustic guitar and they began to play to intro. Jean-Louis stopped them after they did it a few times. “You’ve got to smash it when you play the F, G and F chords,” he said.

“That’s what Don and Phil do. It gives it a special sound. It’s really quite sophisticated.” They tried it and it sounded a lot better. “You should practice,” Jean-Louis said, “and the next time you come over, we’ll try it again.”

“Sounds great,” Willie said.

Simon, sitting on the bed, was silent.

On Saturday, Willie and Simon went to Ollie’s house. As they got there, they heard Mr. Moore telling a neighbor in a flat, nasal voice: “It must be nice to be rich.”

Mr. Moore is crying poor again, Willie thought. People in the Town of Notre Dame often cry poor as a way of showing they are rich. This way they could brag while making it appear they weren’t bragging.

The three boys sat in the Moore’s living room, which couldn’t have been more than 12 feet square. It had a fireplace at one end. Mr. Moore, balding but with a pencil moustache, was hiding behind the newspaper. There was a highball glass on the arm of his chair. Ollie put his “South Pacific” LP on the phonograph. Willie could see Mr. Moore’s hands tighten around the newspaper as the music began: “Some enchanted evening, you may meet a stranger.” In time to the music, Ollie bobbed up and down. When he wanted to play the record again, it was too much for Mr. Moore.

“That’s enough, Oliver,” he snapped.

“All right, father,” Ollie sulked.

The boys went upstairs to Ollie’s room, whose walls were gaudily decorated with pictures of nudes cut from men’s magazines. Willie studied them closely, moving from

side to side so he could get better angles. They're great to look at, but I wouldn't want them on my walls, he thought.

"He has a personality at work," Ollie was saying about his father. "I went there once and he smiled and was cheery and introduced me as his son and heir. At home, he's just washed out. He just sits reading his newspaper, not saying a word." He wears a mask, Willie thought. So does my father. "He always has a cheery smile when he talks to me, but I think he's holding something back. I feel he's not telling me the full story.

Mrs. Moore appeared and told the boys that dinner was ready. She had a round face and a ball of clay for a nose just like her son. Her curls splayed out at the bottom, giving her a triangular face.

"Your father wants you to remove those pictures, Ollie," his mother said. "They make Allison feel uncomfortable."

"She doesn't have to look if she doesn't want to see," Ollie replied. "I keep my door closed."

Allison, Ollie's 14-year-old sister, a cheerleader for the football team, was already at the table. She was blonde and had a page boy.

"We're having ham and chips," Mrs. Moore confided to Willie, who felt like he wanted to crawl into a hole. Pork was okay, but ham was very salty and Willie didn't like it. Also, as a Jew, he felt uncomfortable eating it even though he hardly ever went to the synagogue. He had trouble swallowing it down. But as a reward, he got apple pie and ice cream for dessert.

"There aren't you glad you tried it?" Mrs. Moore said afterward, acting like she had just converted a heathen to Christianity.

“Aren’t you proud of yourself, boy?” Simon said after they left.

Go fuck yourself, boy, Willie thought. Goyim are basically inferior.

That night, Willie had a strange dream in which two Mr. Moores, both dressed in brown suits, marched down the street in lockstep, went into a coffee shop and said, one after the other, “I’ll have a nice ham and cheese sandwich, please.”

The dream soon became a recurring fantasy that occupied Willie’s waking hours. The fantasy became dozens and then hundreds and then ten thousand marching Mr. Moores, who went into the coffee shop and ordered a nice ham-and-cheese.

As they marched, they were followed by ten thousand Mrs. Moores, ten thousand Ollies and ten thousand Allison, all with pageboy haircuts, all twirling cheerleader batons.

At one point, the Mr. Moores stopped and in unison, shouted “fifi” at Willie.

Willie went to a toy store and bought a dozen little men in brown and placed them in a straight line on his desk.

Willie vowed to himself that if Jay Jay picked on Walmsley again, he would speak up. He got his chance the next health period on Tuesday. Jay Jay asked Walmsley a question and when the boy hesitated, he shouted, “Brighten up, Lightbulb! Show some spark!”

The guffaws had just begun when Willie cried out, “Sir, sir.” But his mind went blank, he became tongue-tied and he blurted out the first thing that popped into his head: “The sun’s not yellow. The sun’s not yellow. It’s chicken.”

“What kind of nonsense is that,” said Jay Jay, furious. “How dare you interrupt me when I’m disciplining a student. I’ll see you in my office at 3.”

At 3 p.m., Willie showed up in Jay Jay’s office in a corner of the gym, but the gym teacher was not there. He’s probably making me wait to make me more frightened, Willie thought. Or else, he’s calling my mother to see if he can get permission to give me the strap. After all, he’s got to make an example of me. If he doesn’t make an example of me, other kids might challenge him. If he gives me the strap, he gives me the strap. I’ll cry but it won’t be the worst thing in the world.

Willie remembered he once saw Mr. Sexton, the bad assistant principal, giving the strap to little Jimmy Hayes, a class clown. As Sexton swung down, Jimmy pulled his hand away. Another swing. Another hand pulled away. Finally, Mr. Sexton grabbed Jimmy’s wrist and gave him 12 on each instead of the usual six. Jimmy returned to class with his eyes red.

Willie waited, shifting his weight from one foot to another. About 20 minutes after three, Jay Jay showed up, smelling of liquor.

“Sit down, Goldstein,” he said. “Take a load off your heavy feet.”

Jay Jay sat back. After a moment, he smiled and looked Willie in the eye. Willie hated it when people looked him in the eye. He found it almost impossible to look back.

“Goldstein. I used to pal around with a Goldstein when I was in the Air Force in Winnipeg,” Jay Jay said. “Goldstein ... Let me see, Joe Goldstein, a Jewish fella (Jay Jay pronounced it Jew-eesh). Do you know him?”

Aha, this is the 'I am a friend of Jews' speech, Willie thought. The Nazis probably used it. Break the ice. Makes you drop your defenses, making it easier for them to get you to confess you're a Jew. Some of my best friends are Goyim.

"I really don't know anyone in Winnipeg," he said.

Jay Jay spread his arms on his desk and looked down at Willie.

"What's all this sun's not yellow stuff?" he asked in a quiet voice as if he was trying to be friendly. "What's all this crap?"

"It's just a song I heard on CJFM at night. I was just trying to make a joke. It just suddenly came out," Willie said.

"Joke my ass," Jay Jay said. "You were making fun of me. Tell the truth. Be a man. Tell me what you were trying to do."

"I hate the way you treat Percy," Willie said, looking down, his voice barely above a whisper. His heart was in his throat and he was sweating.

Sensing an advantage, Jay Jay homed in. "Speak up, boy," he shouted. "Speak up so a mouse can hear you. Don't be afraid. I'm not going to eat you."

Willie could see the little rows of teeth when Jay Jay spoke.

Do it, he told himself.

He looked Jay Jay in the eye as fiercely as he could and said in a loud but wavering voice, "I hate the way you bully Percy."

"I do not bully Walmsley," Jay Jay thundered, his cheeks fire-engine red. "How dare you suggest that I do?"

Willie clenched his fists so he could drive away his fear and continued staring directly in Jay Jay's eyes.

“Everybody laughs at him. It can’t be much fun.”

“Walmsley is weak,” Jay Jay replied, glaring at Willie and breathing heavily.

“I’m just trying to make a man out of him. You may sneer at this, but that’s how people are judged. Before he is anything else, a man must be a man.”

“When you go into the Army, they’re going to be a lot tougher on you,” Jay Jay went on with an edge to his voice. “They don’t allow fifties there. You’ll thank me.”

“With all due respect, sir, I don’t intend to join the army,” Willie said.

“Heh, heh, heh, with all due respect, that’s just what you need,” Jay Jay said.

“That’s what’s the matter with this country. It doesn’t have a draft. Every kid should have to go in the army.”

Willie stood there, clenching his fists, saying nothing.

“Well, I’m not going to give you the strap,” Jay Jay said, relaxing and the color draining from his face. “That would be too easy. We need to toughen you up, make a man of you. Eight laps around the track. And I’ll be coming out to check up on you.”

This is going to take hours, Willie grumbled as he changed into his gym clothes. This would have been over by now if he had given me the strap.

The sky was gray and there was a slight drizzle when Willie got outside. He wished he was a thousand miles away. The soccer team was having a practice under the somewhat vacant eyes of Mr. Scammell, the coach. When he was 15, Mr. Scammell had written “The Squid-Jiggin’ Ground,” a song about squid fishing in Newfoundland, and he spent his time away from school writing songs and stories about the province.

Willie set off on his first lap. He ran three-quarters of the way around the track before he got winded and had to walk the rest of the way. He trudged another five laps, running but mostly walking.

He was running and walking through the sixth lap when Jay Jay came out and began yelling at him. "Run, Goldstein, run! Pick up those knees!"

Willie ran about 100 feet, then developed a tremendous stitch in his right side, tripped over his feet and fell down, unable to move.

Willie is 11 years old and he is walking home from elementary school on a winter day when he passes Germy Watson's house. Germy's little sister is outside and she throws a snowball at Willie. Willie, tired of being taunted, throws a snowball back at her. But he is careless when making it and it contains a stone. The snowball hits the sister in the forehead and makes it bleed. "I'm telling," she says and runs inside. Germy and a friend come out. Germy is only two years older than Willie, but he is built like a bull. Willie is paralyzed with guilt about having hurt the little girl. He tries to run, but they catch him and sit on him, landing punch after punch in his face, stomach and shoulders. Germy hits him on the side of temples, saying that is where the skull is weakest. He tries to fight back, but the friend holds his arms. Finally, they leave, but he just hasn't got the strength to get up. So he lies there until a car stops and the driver takes him home. He stays home from school for a week. He is furious at himself for not fighting back harder. For months, the side of his temple aches. For months, he has a dream in which he tries to fight back, but can't.

"Get up, Goldstein, get up," Jay Jay shouted.

Hearing the commotion and noticing that Willie was lying on the ground, Mr. Scammell came over and asked what was going on.

“I’m just disciplining Goldstein for speaking out in class,” Jay Jay said.

“Disciplining him or trying to kill him?” Mr. Scammell said.

“Don’t interfere with me when I’m disciplining a boy,” Jay Jay said.

“Did you have two or three in the teacher’s lounge?” Mr. Scammell asked.

Jay Jay ignored him.

Mr. Scammell lifted Willie to his feet, saying, “Change your clothes, Goldstein, I’m driving you home.”

“You can’t do that,” Jay Jay protested. “I’m disciplining him. I could have given him the strap.”

“I think Goldstein has been punished enough,” Mr. Scammell said. “Get your clothes, boy.”

“Look, it does no good to baby these boys,” Jay Jay said. “I’m just trying to make a man out of him.”

Jay Jay and Mr. Scammell glared at each other for what seemed to be a full minute. Finally, Jay Jay threw his hands in the air and walked off, saying, “Do what you want.”

Willie changed and Mr. Scammell drove him home. The history teacher was a tall man with a balding crown and rimless glasses. He stuttered when he addressed the class and was a little dry, so he wasn’t everyone’s favorite. Willie was amazed he had gone to bat for him.

“Do you think you’ll get in trouble?” Willie asked.

“If anyone says anything, I’ll just say I was protecting the school from a lawsuit,” the teacher replied, shrugging. “Jay Jay has been warned about being too rough on students.”

Once he was home, Willie dragged himself into a chair at the kitchen table. His mother could not have been less sympathetic.

“Look what you did to yourself. You can hardly move,” she said. Her face was drawn.

“I didn’t do it to myself, ma. Jay Jay did it to me. I had to speak up,” Willie said.

“Jews don’t speak up,” his mother replied, her voice rising. “We’re guests in this province. We’re a minority in a minority. Did that Walmsley ever thank you?”

“You don’t understand, mother, Walmsley is me,” Willie said in a tone of exasperation. “We’re both outsiders. When they pick on Walmsley, they’re picking on me. And I couldn’t stand being picked on anymore.”

He began to shout.

“Why did we move here?” he said, full of fury. “There are no Jews. I’m the only Jew in the class. There are only eight Jews in the entire school. Do you know what it’s like to be in school all day and nobody wants to talk to you?”

“You have Simon,” she objected.

“Simon is only my friend because he can boss me around. If it wasn’t for that, he wouldn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Did you like it better on St. Urbain Street, with the rats running in the walls?” his mother said. “With the big trucks? I couldn’t let you go out by yourself. You could have

been killed.” St. Urbain Street was the heart of Montreal’s Jewish community, a street made famous by the novels of Mordecai Richler, its celebrated son.

“I did like it better there.” Willie said. “I didn’t care about the rats. We had friends. Everybody knew each other. It was a community. It was alive. The houses had character, not like the silly boxes here.”

“We moved here because the Bubbee needed a place to live and we wanted to keep the family together,” his mother said. “Besides, the house was a wonderful value.”

“What about me?” Willie said angrily. “Did you ever think what it would be like for me living in a place with no Jews. We could have moved to half a dozen neighborhoods that have Jews.”

“Maybe we didn’t think it through,” she said, “but there are a hundred boys would give everything in the world for what you have. You have your own room. You have the back yard.”

He looked at her as if to say, “Seriously?”

Once he dragged himself up to his room, Willie thought about the old neighborhood, called the Plateau. He remembered the first time he watched television – at the apartment of Uncle Yossie and Aunt Beattie on the corner of St. Urbain and St. Viateur streets. Yossie and Beattie lived on the second floor of a three-story home. The doorbell was on a rope that you pulled once you got inside. The upper half of the front door was frosted glass. It was a Sunday. John had just purchased a new Westinghouse. It stood on a metal table in the corner of the living room, just to the right of the big window that faced onto the street. People were constantly adjusting the thin curtains and the lamps to get just the right amount of light.

Willie sat by the arm of the floral print sofa that was across from the TV set. John would adjust the picture and the rabbit-ear antenna and then stand back and smoke a cigarette, he recalled. The picture would be good for a while and then it would bounce up and down or there would be ZZZZZ lines. Uncle Barney, who was sitting next to Willie in a shiny brown suit, would bound up and make adjustments and then sit down. Then, he would jump up again, make new adjustments and sit back down again. Other people would try to fix it. Then, Yossie would adjust it all over again, get a perfect picture and the whole process would start again.

“It’s the position of the antenna, not the set,” Yossie said expertly. “Westinghouse is not the best, but they had it at a reasonable price. I could have bought an RCA that’s no damn good. I could have bought at DuMont, but it’s just not worth the extra money.”

Yossie knew about the placement of the antenna, which was on the top of Mount Royal, because he was an inventor and knew about such things. He left high school as a sophomore to pursue his inventions. Now, he worked for a company that imported toys from the Far East. He had a thin, oval face, a nose that hooked over his lips, and a grey mustache. He chain-smoked Player’s. Aunt Beattie also smoked. She had a round face and a bosom that looked like it would smother you if she held you to her breast. They had a son, Abie, who was two years younger than Willie. He was a roly-poly little boy whose arms looked like rolling pins connected together. He sat on the floor and made snide comments about the programs.

Willie’s father sat quietly in the corner in a bridge chair. He smoked. Uncle Benjy, who cut meat in a Jewish delicatessen, sat next to Willie’s father. He also smoked. The men talked about work. Benjy said it was slow. The old customers were moving

away. The only good season was the Jewish holidays. Yossie said he could make a good buck if some relative called Solly took him into his business. "I keep pushing but he keeps putting me off," Yossie said.

Soon, the living room was filled with a thick haze -- of cigarette smoke and dreams.

Willie stayed home from school the next day. He was having dinner when the doorbell rang. She came back to report with a frown that he had a visitor. Eliane was standing behind her, carrying a pie.

"Eliane, am I ever glad to see you!" Willie exclaimed.

"I heard what happened to you, so I thought I would do something to cheer you up," she said. She handed him the pie, which was made of apple slices and didn't have a crust."

Willie examined it.

"It's a tarte tatin," Eliane said, "a French apple pie. You bake it upside down so the sugar turns to caramel. I made it myself."

"That was very nice of you," Willie said. "Why don't you stay and have a slice. I'll make some coffee."

She touched him on the shoulder. "I'd love to, but I have to go. My father is waiting in the car. Maybe we can get together next week when you're back at school."

"We can go for a walk in the old neighborhood," he said. "It's very pretty there."

"I'd like that," she said with a big smile.

“And who was that?” Mrs. Goldstein demanded angrily once Eliane was gone. Without giving Willie a chance to answer, she said, “Is that the Palestinian girl whose parents we met at parents’ night?”

“Yes, it is.”

“You’re dating an Arab?” she said incredulously.

“I’ve seen her a few times,” he said. “I’d hardly call it dating. I’ve been to the café where she works. Besides she’s half French.”

“She’s still a shiksa.”

“Stop meddling in my life,” Willie growled. “It’s not like we’re getting married.”

“I’ll soon put a stop to this. I’m going to call her parents.” She took a step toward the phone, which was on the wall.

“Don’t touch that phone,” Willie said, furious. “If you call her parents, I guarantee you I will never go to McGill.”

The following week, Willie and Eliane took the Number 80 bus to St. Viateur and Park Avenue. They stopped for bagels and hot chocolate and then walked up St. Urbain Street, losing themselves among the houses of dark brown brick and grey stone with intriguing nooks and crannies. Some had outdoor staircases, which was strange for a city that had so much snow. Other houses had cone-shaped turrets on top.

“When I see those turrets, I think I’m a genie that’s just been released from a bottle,” Willie said. Eliane smiled, her brown hair flying in the wind.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever said that to anyone before.”

At Marie-Anne Street, they turned right and then went along an alley that ran behind the houses on St. Urbain. At the third house in, Willie stopped and looked through a hole in the fence at the gray, wooden outdoor balconies of the house where he had lived until he was six.

He called Eliane over. "Look," he said. "The second balcony where the tricycle is. That's where I used to play with my trucks. I could play for hours. I had a red truck, maybe it was a fire engine. It was my favorite."

They walked up Marie-Anne.

Passing a candy store, Willie grabbed a large cardboard box that had been thrown away. "We'll need it later," he explained.

They walked across the ball fields, crossed Parc Avenue and walked up a small hill on the Mount Royal. There was wet snow on the ground; winter was arriving. Willie tore up the box into one large piece of cardboard and dropped it on the ground.

"We're going tobogganing," he said.

They got on the cardboard and Willie pushed off with his left leg. Off they went sliding down the hill, turning around a few times before hitting a bump and being pitched into the snow.

"I'm all wet," Eliane said laughing. She shook the snow from her coat.

As Willie looked at her, he had the strong impulse to kiss her. And he did. He grabbed her and kissed her hard on the mouth.

"That was a good kiss, a hungry kiss," she said. "Have you never kissed a girl before?"

"I have, but nobody that mattered," Willie said quietly.

They slid down the hill again, turned round and round, hit the same bump and were tossed into the snow. But this time, they shared a much longer kiss.

Jay Jay stopped picking on Walmsley, except for the occasional “Lightbulb,” and steered clear of Willie except to glare at him. But Willie knew that Jay Jay was just lying in wait. One day, two weeks before the Christmas holidays, Jay Jay got his chance. It was gym class and they were doing what Willie thought of as really stupid wrestling. He was paired with another fat boy, Jessup, who was 5-feet-8, weighed over 200 pounds, sweated profusely and smelled. According to the rules of really stupid wrestling, Jessup crouched on his hands and knees and Willie crouched above him, with his left hand under Jessup’s stomach and his right hand on Jessup’s right hand. The idea was to pull up Jessup’s hand and pin him. Leg holds were barred. The whistle blew. Willie tried to move Jessup’s hand, but it was like trying to dislodge a boulder. Suddenly, Jessup rolled over, pinning Willie on top of him. Willie tried to shake him off, but Jessup got him in a scissor hold around the waist. Gasping for breath, Willie tried to get his legs in front of Jessup’s shoulders and push him off. He managed to get his right leg in front of Jessup’s left shoulder before Jay Jay blew the whistle. Both boys had used their legs.

“You boys were trying professional wrestling, weren’t you?” Jay Jay asked.

“No coach, absolutely not, we were following the rules,” Jessup said, looking like a trapped rat.

“Well, I think you were trying professional wrestling,” Jay Jay said. “And we don’t tolerate it. So I want you to stand holding hands until the bell rings.” He added with a sneer, “You guys should lose weight. You look like two Sumo wrestlers.”

Willie reached out his hand, but Jessup pulled his away as if he had been burned.

“I don’t want them to laugh at me,” he hissed at Willie. Already, Newcomb and Cornish were pointed at Jessup and laughing.

“Aw, give up, Jessup,” Willie said. “We’re fifis. Your place or mine?”

After school, nobody was around, so Willie, embarrassed and angry, decided to treat himself to a chocolate milkshake at Vanier’s. The sky was cloudy and the snow crunched underfoot as he walked to the center of town. His head was down when someone tapped him on the shoulder -- Eliane.

“Don’t you want to talk to me,” she said, pretending to be hurt.

“I didn’t see you,” Willie said, surprised. “I was thinking about something.”

“Yes, I know. I heard about it in school,” she said. “That was terrible. What is a fifi anyway? A poodle? What a stupid word. That gym teacher is un grand fou. He would never be able to get away with that in France. Where are you going?”

Willie said he was on his way to Vanier’s to get a milkshake.

“Milkshake, c’est pour les vaches,” she said. “Come to my café and I’ll give you a real coffee and we can talk.”

When they got to the café, Eliane’s mother was sitting behind the counter. They had coffee and then Eliane suggested they go upstairs to her room because they could talk more comfortably. Once in the tiny room, they sat on the bed and began kissing slowly. Willie parted her lips with his tongue and explored her mouth. She took his hand and placed it inside her sweater. He rubbed her stomach and worked his way up to her bra.

“Wait,” she said, reached behind her and unhooked it. Willie caressed her breast and rubbed her nipple. She flushed.

The bedroom door crashed open and there was a shout.

“Eliane, que fais tu?” her mother demanded. “Et avec cette Juif.”

“Il n’est pas un Juif,” Eliane shot back. “Il est un ami.”

She turned to Willie.

“Maybe you better wait outside,” she said, trying to control her anger. “I won’t be a moment.”

Willie waited in the cold. He watched his breath make vapor trails. Finally, Eliane came down. Her eyes were red and she looked like she had been crying.

“Look, maybe we better cool it for a while,” she said. “My mother is furious. She sees the way you look at me. She thinks you’ll make me pregnant and ruin my life.” She kissed him on both cheeks and ran inside before Willie could say anything. He tried to put the best face on it. Their love was doomed from the start. They were the Romeo and Juliet of Notre Dame High. He was lucky things had gotten as far as they had. But it didn’t help. He was deeply hurt.

Willie spent a lot of time alone during the Christmas vacation. He went back to the old neighborhood and remembered the fun he had had with Eliane, sliding down the hill on the cardboard. At the Fairmount deli, he treated himself to a smoke meat sandwich “as lean as possible” and a cherry soda.

He went to Classics Books on Ste. Catherine Street and rummaged through the poetry section. He read Dylan Thomas’ “Quite Early One Morning” and imagined he was the young poet waiting for the cats to come over the fence in his backyard so he could pelt them with snowballs. He read the famous poem by Ezra Pound:

In a Station of the Metro
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

And he found a poem he especially liked, “O Taste and See” by Denise Levertov:

The world is
not with us enough
O taste and see

the subway Bible poster said,
meaning The Lord, meaning
if anything all that lives
to the imagination's tongue,

grief, mercy, language,
tangerine, weather, to
breathe them, bite,
savor, chew, swallow, transform

into our flesh our
deaths, crossing the street, plum quince,
living in the orchard and being

hungry, and plucking
the fruit.

That's the thing, Willie thought, plucking the fruit.

One Saturday, when it wasn't too cold, he walked along the Lachine Canal in the southern part of the city. There was a terrific view of the Montreal skyline, the light flashing from the ice on the water. He could hear the muted crash of tire chains in the distance. Down the path and to the left, there was a beaver pond that still hadn't frozen over. Beavers only came out at dusk, but there was a blue heron that stood on one leg and the pond was fringed by maple trees and silver birches. It was quiet. Willie, though he was getting frozen, sat on a bench and enjoyed the solitude. He took a notebook from his pocket and wrote:

Under the shade of plane trees,
light gathers in brown pools
on golden pebbles.

In the distance, there are green mountains.

Suddenly, the clouds shifted and there was a flash of sunlight on a tree to his left. A blackbird on a low branch opened its mouth and began singing. So did a robin on the ground a few feet away. In an instant, a chorus of birds was singing.

“The whole world is screaming,” Willie wrote in his notebook.

Over the vacation, Simon and Jean-Louis went skiing in Mont-Tremblant, 80 miles north of the city. Willie, Simon and Ollie had gone skiing in the Laurentians many times. And while Willie was a little surprised that he and Ollie hadn’t been invited, he gave it little thought. Simon and Jean-Louis had been spending a lot of time together.

The two were supposed to be gone for a week. The first sign that something had gone wrong came when Willie noticed Simon’s Volkswagen in the driveway of his house. He called Simon but there was no answer. He called Ollie, who said, “There was a problem. He’ll tell you.”

“What? Did they have a fight?” Willie asked.

“He’ll tell you,” Ollie replied. “I had a feeling this was going to happen.”

Willie finally caught up with Simon the next day. He looked like he hadn’t slept in several days.

“I got the shock of my life,” Simon said. “We were in our room and getting ready go to sleep when he put his arms around me and started to kiss me.”

“What did you do?”

“What do you think I did? I got out of there as fast as I could. I obviously couldn’t stay there. I threw my stuff in the car and drove home.”

“God, that must have been awful,” Willie said.

“It was disgusting,” Simon said. “I felt like throwing up.”

Willie was stunned. This was totally outside his experience. Even though the word *fifi* resounded through the halls of Notre Dame High every day, nobody knew a real homosexual.

“How did he get home?”

“Took the bus, I guess. I don’t care. Maybe he took a taxi. It’s not like they don’t have loads of dough.”

“Have you heard from him?”

“He’s called me a lot.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“I wrote him a letter.”

“You -- what? – wrote him a letter?”

Simon handed Willie a copy of a letter. It was long-winded and full of typos and ended with the words, “Only if you change your ways can I be your friend.”

“Simon, there is no way in hell Jean-Louis can change,” Willie said.

“It’s like having blue eyes.”

Simon leaned back and dismissed the suggestion haughtily as if it wasn’t worth discussing. “Of course he can change.” he insisted. “It’s a matter of will power. Besides, it’s just a phase. He’ll outgrow it.”

“Didn’t you see this coming?” Willie said

“No, I had no idea,” Simon replied.

“The letter sounds like a lawyer’s letter,” Willie said. “It seems like you’re suggesting that unless he stays away from you, you’ll take legal action.”

“Well, I don’t want him to try it again.”

“Jean-Louis must be mortified,” Willie said. “It will be really awkward when you guys see each other in school. If it gets out, there’ll be a scandal. The gossip will go on forever.”

Just then, the front door closed and Willie heard the pater come clumping up the stairs. When he saw that Willie was holding the letter, he rushed over, his basketball belly bouncing, and snatched it out of his hand. “Boy, I told you not to let anyone see this letter,” he barked at Simon. “The world doesn’t need to know our business.”

“I think I should go,” Willie said.

I don’t feel sorry for you, Simon. I feel sorry for Jean-Louis. Willie walked home. He opened his heart to you. He shared with you his greatest secret. He’s obviously been debating with himself about whether to tell anyone. And he told you. And you left him in Mont-Tremblant -- and wrote him a letter.

Jean-Louis returned to school two weeks after the fall from his roof. He had a cast on his right leg. He stayed mostly to himself.

That night, the phone rang. Willie picked it up but there was nobody there. He was about to hang up when he heard a crackling sound on the other end.

“Is there anybody there?”

The line went dead. A few minutes later, the phone rang again. Willie picked it up and heard Jean-Louis’s voice.

“Hi, it’s Jean-Louis. It was me who called before. There was some trouble on the line. I couldn’t hear you.”

“Hi, how are you doing? It must have been hard to come back to school for the first day.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“It *was* hard. I guess I’m a little depressed,” Jean-Louis said. “My dad suggested I switch to Lower Canada College -- you know the prep school -- but what the heck’s the point? It’s almost the end of the year, a few months to go. I’ll be graduating soon. I’m just sorry I put everybody to so much trouble.”

There was a silence and then Jean-Louis said in a sad, low voice:

“I’m thinking of going away.”

“A trip would do you good,” Willie said. “Take your mind off things.”

“Not that kind of trip.” Jean-Louis’s voice trailed off.

“That would be silly, Jean-Louis,” Willie replied immediately. “There’s no reason for you to think that way.”

“I feel so worthless. I’m a fifi, and now everyone knows.”

“Fifi is just a word, Jean-Louis. These people hate everyone who isn’t like them. They’d probably hate Moses if he showed up in the center of town with a beard and the tablets. They’re small-minded. We live in a small-minded town. This will blow over. You’ll go to college. You’ll find someone to live your life with. You’ll have a happy life.”

“I can’t believe that.”

“I know, but things will change, trust me. You’re starting therapy next week, right. That will make a difference. That will make you feel better.”

“Let’s hope,” Jean-Louis replied.

“I was so sure. I was so sure,” Jean-Louis went on, and Willie imagined how Jean-Louis had wrestled with telling someone about what he called his “problem.”

“We didn’t have to have sex. We could have just lived together and I could have found sex elsewhere.”

“That’s not realistic, Jean-Louis,” Willie said. “What if Simon got a girlfriend who didn’t like the idea of you living there? He sighed. “Jean-Louis,” he said, “you’ve got to accept the fact that Simon doesn’t have the same feelings for you that you have for him.”

Jean-Louis said nothing for a moment, then: “Do you think he’s a fifi? I mean because of the violent way he pushed me away. Do you think he was frightened by feelings he didn’t know he had.”

Willie, surprised, said he didn’t think so. “I don’t think he’s a very nice person, but I don’t think he’s a fifi. We’ve talked for hours about everything under the sun, bared out deepest secrets. I think I would know if he was a homosexual. You’ve got to stop going over and over this.”

“I know,” Jean-Louis said.

There was silence and then Jean-Louis thanked Willie profusely and hung up. Willie’s heart was pounding. He had been forcing himself to find the right words to say. He was terrified he would say the wrong thing and push Jean-Louis off the edge.

The next day, Willie heard at school that Jean-Louis had called other kids and made vague threats of killing himself for real next time. That made some ask whether he had really fallen off his roof or tried to commit suicide and in turn, it led to questions about whether something happened when he went skiing with Simon, and so the story got out. Willie, meanwhile, went to the Classics bookstore and read up on depression. He thought a lot of what he read had been written by Martians, but two things stood out: depression was closely linked to anxiety and people suffering from depression thought things were hopeless and would never get better. He resolved there and then to always tell Jean-Louis things weren't hopeless.

Willie did not hear from Jean-Louis until the night after he began therapy. "How's it going," Willie asked.

"It's okay. We talk a lot and he shows me pictures."

"Pictures?"

"Yeah, pictures of nude men and nude women. When I see pictures of nude men, I get a mild electric shock. It's not painful, but it's still a shock. When I see pictures of women there's no shock."

This is like using electric shocks to cure depression. Barbaric, Willie thought. But he said nothing.

Jean-Louis was silent for a moment.

Then, "I've been thinking of going away."

"Don't talk like that," Willie said, his jaw muscles tightening.

"I just feel so bad about myself."

“You shouldn’t feel bad about yourself. You haven’t done anything to feel bad about. It’s not a sin. I think it’s like being born with blue eyes. There’s not much you can do about it. Kinsey says it’s quite common. Almost 40 percent of men have at least one homosexual experience.”

“It’s not like being born with blue eyes,” Jean-Louis insisted. “I’m going to miss out on all the good things in life. I’m never going to have a real girlfriend. I’m never going to get married. I’m never going to have children.”

“You’re letting your fears run away with you. Take things one step at a time. Give yourself time to get used to things. Maybe the therapy will work.”

“It’s just so hard . . .”

“Don’t do anything now. Give yourself time. Going away is no solution. I know you feel like an outsider. I’m an outsider, too. This is a conservative place. The people don’t care about anything except being the same as everyone else and eating ham-and-cheese sandwiches.

“I’m a queer. I’m a faggot,” Jean-Louis said. “My uncle’s always saying, ‘Don’t do that, you’ll queer the deal.’ And now I’m the queer. I feel like all the kids at school are always staring at me.”

“They’re not staring at you. They’re staring at pictures of themselves eating ham-and-cheese sandwiches.”

The conversation went on for another half-hour or so, back and forth, back and forth. When it was over, Willie felt drained. Simon -- the big hero who has all the answers -- should be doing this, but he doesn’t have the guts, he thought.

Jean-Louis did not call for a week. When he did he sounded very down.

“Nothing’s going right,” he said. “Dad’s getting on my back to continue with the swimming team once my cast comes off. I guess I should do that, but I just don’t give a damn. I’m just too depressed.”

“The therapy isn’t working. It’s barbaric,” he went on. “They show me pictures and then they give me shocks. And they hurt. And nothing happens. It’s like I’m being tortured for who I am. I’m a rat in a lab.”

“I can’t change who I am. I never will. I’m beginning to think you were right. This is part of my genes. The therapy will never work.” He paused.

“I’ll never be able to live a normal life. I’ll never be able to marry and have children. I’ll never be able to have the things most people take for granted. I’m an abomination. The Bible says so.” He began to cry.

“The Bible also says that if a bride is discovered not to be a virgin, she should be stoned to death. We don’t believe that any more,” Willie said. “Jean-Louis, you’re not an abomination. You’re a person as worthy of love and affection as anyone else. Give yourself time.”

“I *have* given myself time,” Jean-Louis said. “Don’t you think I’ve been dealing with this a long time? It just didn’t happen overnight. I’ve been fighting myself for years. And it goes on and on and never gets any better. I’m a total fuckup. I’m totally worthless. I’m so wretched I think I would be better off dead.”

“Jean-Louis, don’t talk like that,” Willie said. But even before he could finish, Jean-Louis hung up.

Alarmed by what Jean-Louis said, Willie sat in his desk chair for an hour going over what he should do. Discussing it with his parents was useless. They had already

warned him not to hang around with Jean-Louis. Telling a teacher would probably bring the mind your-own-business response: It's very nice of you to think of Jean-Louis, but I'm sure his parents have the problem well in hand. Telling Jean-Louis's parents, if he could get them on the phone, would mean Jean-Louis would probably never speak to him again. He decided to go and see Jean-Louis's shrink, Dr. Lawrence Solomon, something he had been thinking of doing for a while.

The next morning, he called Dr. Solomon's office at McGill's Allen Memorial Institute and to his surprise was given an appointment after school that afternoon. Deciding he needed moral support, he called Simon and asked him to come along. "Two heads are better than one," he said.

"Can't do it," Simon said. "The pater would go ballistic. You saw how angry he was about the letter. He told me he doesn't want me to have anything more to do with Jean-Louis. He probably thinks I'm one of them."

"You don't have to tell him, Simon. You don't tell him everything you do. Come on. Jean-Pierre is going through a terrible time. He needs your help."

"Can't do it, boy."

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Simon," Willie said. "The psychiatrist isn't going to kiss you."

"Can't do it."

Dr. Solomon, a man in his 50s, had watery, light blue eyes and an air of incredible sadness. Willie had heard he was a concentration camp survivor.

“I’m worried that Jean-Louis is going to try to commit suicide again. He sounds really desperate,” Willie began, telling Solomon about the phone call the previous night and the others like it.

“I don’t think he is going to try to commit suicide,” said Solomon, who had a flat face and silver hair and spoke with a German accent. “He’s just testing.”

“Just testing? Who is he testing?” Willie asked.

“He wants you to tell him that you don’t want him to do it. He wants reassurance that he is a worthwhile person, that you will accept him no matter what,” the psychiatrist said. “He needs to know that there are people who will not reject him because he is a homosexual. He has tremendous shame about what he is.”

“So, is what I am doing helpful?”

“Yes.”

“He still talks of him and Simon being a couple and him finding sex outside the relationship?”

“He is still fighting with himself,” Solomon replied. “He is still not ready to admit he is a homosexual. This is a compromise in which he can live in the conventional world and relegate his sexuality to something outside himself. This is a compromise in which he can be a homosexual and still live in the normal world. We have discussed this.”

“Does behavior therapy work?” Willie asked.

“Studies have shown that it reduces the frequency of homosexual sex. But it does not change the underlying desire,” the psychiatrist replied.

“Could you put that in laymen’s terms,” Willie said. “Do you mean it doesn’t work?”

“It works and it doesn’t work,” Solomon said. “It’s not what you might call a cure, but it makes it easier for homosexuals to control their desires. It makes it easier for them to live in society.”

“You mean to pretend to love a woman, get married and have children,” he said.

“I wouldn’t put it that way. I’d just say that it reduces anxiety. It makes it easier for the person to live.”

Tremendous doubletalk, Willie thought. Why make it easier for homosexuals to live like heterosexuals? Why can’t they live as they are?

“What Jean-Louis said last night really scared me,” Willie said. “I’d really like you to call his parents and talk with them.”

“I have spoken with Jean-Louis about this many times,” Solomon said, looking at his watch. “But if it will make you feel better, I will call them.”

He pushed the intercom button and asked his secretary for the number for Jean-Louis’s father. Then he shook Willie’s hand and thanked him for coming. As Willie left, he heard Solomon making a phone call. He hoped he was talking to Jean-Louis’s father.

When Willie got home, he called Simon again. “The psychiatrist said it would be very helpful for you to talk to Jean-Louis,” Willie lied. “It would help him accept himself.”

Simon refused. “If I talk to him, it’s going to send him the wrong message. It’s just going to give him false hopes that we’re going to be together.”

Willie grew sarcastic. “The two of you can meet in a public place, then he won’t be tempted to try to kiss you.”

“You can use all the sarcasm you want. I’m not going to do it.”

“A real man would talk to him,” Willie said. “A real man would show him sympathy. You’re the fifi.”

“If I talk to him, it’ll just keep alive his fantasy that we’re going to be together,” Simon repeated. “That won’t be good for either of us.”

“Simon, I think Jean-Louis knows all too well you’re not going to be together,” Willie said, raising his voice. “You know, you’re a prince. You really are. You won’t even admit you’re a Jew.”

“I’m not a Jew. According to Jewish law, religion follows the mother. It’s only here in Quebec that it follows the father.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Willie exploded. “Jean-Louis tried to kill himself. He hates himself and thinks the whole world does, too. He just needs a little sympathy. What are you so afraid of? Are you a fifi, too?”

“Of course not,” Simon said. “Why do you think I drove away?” He hung up.

That evening, after the dinner dishes had been cleared and Willie and his parents were sitting around the kitchen table, his father said it had been a bad idea to visit Dr. Solomon.

“What if one of your classmates saw you – or a teacher?” he said.

“I don’t think anyone saw me – but what if they did? What’s the big deal.”

“They’ll think you’re crazy. Do you want people to think you’re crazy?”

“To be frank, I don’t give a shit about what people think of me. But why would people think I’m crazy.”

“Because it’s a nuthouse. Everybody knows they handle the toughest cases.”

“That’s ridiculous. It’s not a nuthouse. It’s McGill’s psychiatry department. And what if somebody saw me? Maybe I was just taking somebody there. Maybe I stopped in to use the bathroom. Besides, lots of people have shrinks these days.

“People always think the worst.”

“If I cared what people think, I wouldn’t try to help Jean-Louis,” Willie replied.

“Look, people believe that mental illness is hereditary,” his father said.

“Nobody’s going to want to marry you if you have a mental illness. They’ll think it’ll be passed on to your children.”

What’s crazy is this theory, Willie thought.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a child, okay,” he snapped. “In the blink of an eye, we’ve gone from visiting a friend’s psychiatrist to having a mental illness that will prevent me from getting married and living a full life. It just doesn’t make sense. I know you’re just trying to scare me and it’s not working. You sound like an ad for a used car.”

“I’m just warning you you’re taking a risk,” his father said. “Is it worth taking the risk.”

Willie said nothing. He just glared at his father.

“And what did the big genius the psychiatrist say about your friend?” his mother said.

“He said he’d talk to Jean-Louis parents, but he doesn’t think he’s going to commit suicide.”

Oh God, why did I tell her that? When will I learn to hold my tongue? I know just what she’s going to say.

“Then you don’t have to see him anymore,” his mother said.

“He’s in a bad way. He’s very depressed. He needs all the friends he’s got – and right now that isn’t very many,” Willie said.

He looked at his mother sharply. “What are you worried about? He isn’t going to rape me. Being a homosexual isn’t catching.”

“If you hang around with him, people will think you’re a homosexual, too. What other reason could you have?”

“To help someone who needs help.”

“People don’t help others, they help themselves,” his mother said, her voice rising. “What business is it of yours?”

“He’s me, don’t you understand?” Willie replied angrily. “I know what it’s like to be an outsider. That’s the way I’ve been treated my whole life. I can’t let another person suffer like that. I can’t just stand there and do nothing.”

“Listen to him. Listen to him talk,” his father was shouting. “You have the house. You have your own room. I didn’t have my own room. A hundred boys would like to be in your place.”

“Well, why don’t you rent my room to one of them.” Willie growled, staring at his father. “You know, you should be selling refrigerators to Eskimos, Dad. You’re a terrific salesman,” he fumed. “I don’t care about the house or my own room. What I would have liked is to go to a school where I felt accepted, where I felt at ease. Where I didn’t have to feel on edge all the time, didn’t have to worry that someone might ridicule me or try to pick a fight with me.”

“It’s toughened you up.”

“No, it hasn’t, dad. It’s just made me hate myself.”

His father got up and went into the living room.

A few days later at lunch time, Willie saw a cluster of girls cooing over Eliane, who appeared to be showing off a ring. Puzzled, he went over to her even though they hadn't spoken in several weeks.

On the third finger of her left hand, there was a dark blue stone with flecks of green. The blue was so intense that Willie couldn't help looking at it.

"It's a black opal," Eliane explained. "Isn't it beautiful. "It's my engagement ring."

Willie's heart sank. "You're engaged?" he said, downcast.

"Yes, to Gerard," she said.

"I thought you didn't want to become a baby-making machine."

"We won't get married for quite a while," she said. "Maybe I'll even give the ring back."

"Then what's the point of getting engaged?"

"Willie, you can't imagine the pressure I got from my parents," Eliane said. "The number of times they said I was going to get pregnant and nobody would want to marry me. The screaming and the crying. Finally, I just gave in."

The girls melted away.

"God, I can't imagine getting married at 18. I haven't begun to live my life."

"It's a big step for me, too. I'm still getting used to it. I might decide to give the ring back."

"And Gerard is okay with this?"

"Yes, he said he wanted to get the engagement nailed down."

“Are you a piece of wood or a loose shingle? It doesn’t sound very romantic.”

“Gerard is very eager to marry me.”

“Since you’re spoken for, do you think we could have coffee sometime? I need someone I can talk to.”

“I don’t think so. If mother found out, she would have a nervous breakdown.”

“But she has nothing to worry about now.”

“Yes, but part of the problem is that Simon came to the café a few times and she thought he was you. You don’t look that different.”

“We’re both male.”

“Well, she thought we had seen each other more than we had. That’s why she got so upset when she saw us kissing. She thought things were more serious than they were.”

“Simon came to the café?”

“Yes. After the dance, he called me several times and finally I said yes.”

“So you were seeing both of us?”

“Yes. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to create bad blood between friends.”

“He could have told me himself, the lover of mankind, but he’s too chicken. Anyway, we’re not friends anymore.”

He grabbed her left hand in both of his hands and gave it a little shake, looking her in the eyes. Then, as he started to walk away, she said, “So how goes it with you, otherwise. Comment s ca va?”

“I find it hard trying spending time with Jean-Louis,” he said. “I’m worried I’ll say something that will set him off.”

“You’re doing a brave thing, you know. People might think you’re a queer.”

“I’m sure some of them do, but maybe some of them will think I’m kind.”

Whatever Dr. Solomon told Jean-Louis’ parents had some effect because Jean-Louis’s depression began to lift. He began to open up. He no longer thought that Willie was befriending him because he was rich. Willie no longer feared Jean-Louis would try to kiss him. Jean-Louis showed Willie drawings he had done. He said he shared Willie’s love of Dylan Thomas, especially “Quite Early One Morning.”

Willie introduced him to Levertov’s poetry and Jean-Louis, in turn, told him about three important Montreal poets, Irving Layton, Louis Dudek and Dudek’s protege, Leonard Cohen. He showed Willie a Layton poem, “The Swimmer,” which was written in a restaurant in 1944, the poet grabbing a waitress’s pencil and jotting down his thoughts on a napkin.

Willie liked the third stanza:

He dives, floats, goes under like a thief
Where his blood sings to the tiger shadows
In the scentless greenery that leads him home,
A male salmon down fretted stairways
Through underwater slums....

Jean-Louis said his father had met Layton and thought him something of a blowhard but maybe they could go to one of his readings sometime. Willie agreed. He was glad to have someone to discuss poetry with.

Jean-Louis’s cast was coming off that week and he invited Willie to go swimming with him at the McGill pool. As someone who was trying out for the Olympic team, he had a key and could go there any time.

The pool was deserted when Jean-Louis and Willie got there. The lights were dim and the water in the pool sparkled. Jean-Louis was overjoyed to be free of his cast and knifed through the water at high speed. Willie marveled at his tight, ropey muscles, his tight abdomen. All his life he had dreamed of having a body like that.

Jean-Louis asked Willie to come in the water. Willie hesitated at first but then decided why not, and jumped in. He tried to keep up with Jean-Louis as he sliced through the water powerfully, but he swallowed some water and began coughing and Jean-Louis had to pull him out. They both were laughing. *At last he's in a good mood, Willie thought. Things are changing.*

Willie and Jean-Louis hung around together. They went to Vanier's and had large Cokes. They talked about hockey. Willie said he thought Maurice "the Rocket" Richard was the best. Jean-Louis said the Rocket relied too much on heavy checking. His favorite was Jean Belliveau because he was a better skater and stick-handler. Belliveau could dance in and out of the other players and easily outmaneuver the goalie. They played "Wake Up Little Susie" with two guitars, getting the intro right. "We're good," Jean-Louis said. "Maybe we should get some songs together and form a duo."

Out of the blue, one day, Jean-Louis asked, "What's it like to be a Jew?"

"What's it like to have everything you want?" Willie replied.

"It's fun," Jean-Louis said. "Seriously, tell me."

"Oh, you know, we have horns and drink the blood of Christian babies during Passover."

"Jews don't have horns."

“Yes we do. We hide then under those little black skull caps we wear.”

“You’re not wearing a skull cap.”

“My horns are very small.”

“That wasn’t really my question. What’s it like to be a Jew? Did you experience a lot of discrimination?”

“Let’s put it this way. In the summer, my parents take a house in a Jewish area in the Laurentians and it’s fine. I always get along with the kids. Here, they either totally ignore me or they ridicule me to make me feel inferior. It’s not only that I’m Jewish. It’s being different. They treat Ollie the same way because he’s a fifi.”

“Do you go to temple?”

“I stopped going. There are a lot of fussy rules: You can’t turn on the TV on Saturday -- you can’t drive -- you have to pray three times a day. I had a lot of trouble following the rules – how could I pray at school? I began to have these weird thoughts that if I didn’t follow the rules, God would kill my parents. I found that only way to stop the thoughts was not to follow the rules. So I stopped going to shul. The thoughts went away.”

“Wow, that’s quite a story.”

“Yeah. I’m a little crazy.”

“How about you?” Willie asked. “Do you go to church?”

“Not very often. It’s a lot of malarkey.”

“That’s how I feel. To be a Jew you have to see everything through the eyes of a Jew. I find that impossible to do.”

Changing the subject, Jean-Louis asked if Willie had ever hit a home run.

“What?” he said, then realized what Jean-Louis was asking. “Oh . . . no.”

“Third base?”

“Almost.”

“With Eliane?”

“No. Rivka. Rivka Kaplan.”

“Who’s Rivka Kaplan?”

“A Jewish girl. Slightly plump. Not that pretty. Kept pushing my hand away. She lost interest once she realized I wasn’t marriage material.”

“Why not?”

“Not rich enough.”

Willie picked up the guitar and began making up silly lyrics to the tune of “I Love a Piano.”

I love your wallet,
I love your wallet,
It’s the thing that really gives me zing.
I love your wallet,
I love your wallet,
I’ll hold out until I get a ring.

As Willie was leaving, Jean-Louis said he had decided to stop trying to qualify for the Olympic swimming team. Too much pressure. Willie said he was doing the right thing.

Two days later, Jean-Louis called, terribly upset. He told the coach of the swimming team he was dropping out and the coach told Jay Jay, who bawled the shit out of him.

“He asked, What the hell did I think I was doing? I was letting down the team. I was letting down the school. I was letting down my parents. I was giving up a chance at the Olympics. I was giving up the chance to have a career as an athlete,” Jean-Louis said.

“He said I just should say it never happened. Simon made it all up. Christ, everybody has an old bachelor uncle who says he’s a confirmed bachelor. Everybody knows the real story. They just wink at it. I should just suck it up and be a man. Gave me the old, “before he is anything else, a man must be a man” crap.

“Only I’m not a man.”

Jean-Louis began to cry.

“And that’s not all. I saw Simon in the hall today and I went up to say hello to him, tell him things were getting better, and he walked right past as if I didn’t exist. As if I didn’t fucking exist.”

He began to cry uncontrollably, his body wracked by sobs.

“Jean-Louis...” Willie began to say, but before he could find the words, Jean-Louis began shouting, “You’re not my friend. You’re not my friend. Simon was my friend, but you’re not my friend,” and hung up.

Willie froze.

He knew Jean-Louis had suffered a tremendous setback, maybe even a breakdown, but he didn’t know what to do. He called Dr. Solomon’s office but only got the answering service. He left a message begging the psychiatrist to telephone Jean-Louis or his parents. He called the police and got an extremely bored police dispatcher who made Willie repeat everything three times before finally saying, “Okay sir, we’ll send over a car to check it out.”

He got on his bicycle and raced over to Jean-Louis' house.

When he got there, the home was dark except for a light in the garage. He heard the noise of a car engine inside. Panicked, he banged on the door furiously, attracting the attention of a neighbor.

"I think Jean-Louis's in there. I think he's trying to kill himself."

"Get control of yourself, son," the man said.

"I think he's trying to kill himself," Willie screamed.

The man said he would call the police.

A patrol car pulled up just as the man was going inside. Officers broke down the door and found Jean-Louis inside his car with the engine running. An ambulance took him to Jewish General, the nearest hospital. He was in a coma. The doctors said he had suffered brain damage. He died two weeks later.

In the days before his death, Willie visited him regularly. He read newspaper stories to him and told him about things going on at school. He had heard that talking helps a coma patient regain consciousness. He thought Jean-Louis recognized his presence. Once, he thought he saw Jean-Louis smile. At the very least, his being there allowed Jean-Louis' mother and father to take a break, go out and have a cup of coffee, smoke a cigarette.

On the day Jean-Louis died, he opened his eyes. His mother rushed over to him. Tears began to flow and she grabbed his hands, repeating, "Oh thank God! Oh thank God!" Jean-Louis smiled at Willie when he came over to the bed, and Willie thought he tried to shake his hand. Jean-Louis had lost a lot of weight and Willie could make out the bones in his cheeks and jaw. Jean-Louis said something guttural, much like a dog

growling. He said it again when Willie leaned over to hear better. It sounded like, “Goodbye.” Then he closed his eyes and died. His mother began shaking, shaking so violently that Willie thought she would hurt herself. “Why did he die? Why did he die,” she sobbed. Jean-Louis’ father, who had been having a cigarette, came in and rushed over to the bed, shouting, “Jean-Louis, Jean-Louis.” Then, looking like a broken man, he took his wife in his arms and both wept. Willie left. There were tears his eyes, too.

In the weeks that followed, Willie constantly blamed himself for Jean-Louis’ death. “If only I had acted quicker,” he told himself over and over. “If only I had known what to do.”

The funeral was small. Willie sat at the back of the church, not wishing to intrude on the family’s grief. He cried during the service. Afterward, Jean-Louis’ mother, an elegant woman with high cheek bones and pale blonde hair, hugged him and said what a good friend he had been to her son. Jean-Louis’ father shook his hand.

A memorial service was held at the high school. The principal and the teachers made self-serving speeches about how we will never know what was in Jean-Louis’ heart, whether his death was deliberate or an accident, but we all must have sympathy for the tremendous emotional turmoil he must have been experiencing. He was a troubled person in a troubled world. We must pray for his soul. It was so mechanical it made Willie sick.

Jay Jay sat on the stage. When it was over and he was going down the stairs, Jean-Louis’ mother, usually composed, rushed up to him and began screaming, “You

killed him. You killed my son as surely as if you had stabbed him in the heart. You and your crazy ideas about manhood. A real man doesn't pick on children."

The auditorium was suddenly filled with silence. Mrs. Desjardins glared at Jay Jay. Suddenly, she began beating her fists against his chest and shoulders. Jay Jay managed a look that said, "Why is this crazy woman hitting me," but because he was flushed, Willie could see that he was terrible embarrassed.

Willie rushed to the stage, not knowing whether he was going to lead Mrs. Desjardins away or hit Jay Jay. But before he could do anything, Jean-Louis's father put his arm around Mrs. Desjardins and Mr. Doyle, the good assistant principal, grabbed Willie by the arm.

"You don't want to do anything you'll be sorry for later," Mr. Doyle said. "Let's go grab a coke."

They walked to Vanier's. Once they sat down, Willie poured out his heart, saying he felt responsible for Jean-Louis' death, that he wished Simon had been more sympathetic, that he hated the Town of Notre Dame and that he wanted to go to college in New York.

Mr. Doyle put his hand on Willie's arm. "Don't blame yourself. You did all could. You're not a psychiatrist."

Simon: "A lot of good the psychiatrist did."

Mr. Doyle changed the subject.

"The people here aren't bad people," he said. "They just say what's expected of them. They don't say what they really think. They don't know what they really think. That's why they go to psychoanalysts – to find out." He laughed.

He said he had lived in New York for two years while he got an M.A. in history from Columbia.

“Why did you come back?” Willie asked.

“She’s from here,” he said, referring to his wife. “We were having a kid. She wanted him raised here. But I still think of going back for my Ph.D. Maybe I will. You should go. You’d love it.”

“I got into NYU, but my parents won’t let me go,” Willie said.

It was the last day of school. Willie stood near the door to the teachers parking lot, his hand inside his windbreaker. He was waiting for Jay Jay to come out. Jay Jay had to come out this door to get his car. Willie stood with his back to the wall near the door. He waited for about 15 minutes. Finally Jay Jay came out.

"Jay Jay," Willie shouted.

Jay Jay turned.

Willie quickly drew a black gun from inside his windbreaker and pointed it at Jay Jay.

"Get down on your knees," Jay Jay. "I'm not kidding around."

"Who's going to kill me, you?" the gym teacher sneered. "You haven't got the guts."

Willie strode up to Jay Jay until only three feet separated them.

"We'll see who hasn't got the guts. Get on your knees, Jay Jay."

“Listen boy, this has gone far enough. Give me the gun and we’ll forget about this. You won’t get in trouble. Otherwise, I’m going to call the police. You’ll be expelled.

You'll never go to McGill."

"You can't expel me on the last day of school and I don't want to go to McGill. There's nothing you can threaten me with."

Willie stared at Jay Jay for a whole minute.

"I'm going to kill you the way you killed my friend Jean-Louis. I'm going to end your rotten life. Now get on your knees and pray for your miserable soul." Willie cocked the trigger.

"I'll say I was driven crazy by Jean-Louis's death. They'll send me to the nut house and every minute I'm there, I'll imagine you lying on the ground, the blood oozing out of your head. I'll imagine it a thousand times and I'll be happy. Now, get on the ground.

Jay Jay, realizing the depth of Willie's anger, got on his knees and began playing for time.

"I didn't kill Jean-Louis. I just tried to talk some sense into him. You're throwing your life away."

"You killed Jean-Louis just as surely as if you had fired this gun into him," Willie said. "He was on the edge. He was doing better. But you pushed him over. Now repeat the bullshit you're famous for: "Before he is anything else, a man Say it."

"Before he is anything else, a man must be a man."

"It's bullshit, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"The words don't mean anything, do they?"

"No."

Jay Jay, sweating profusely, made a grab for the gun, but Willie kicked him violently in the jaw."

Jay Jay yelped with pain.

Willie kicked him in the jaw again.

"I think you broke my jaw," Jay Jay said, close to tears.

By now, a crowd had gathered. There were shouts of "Willie put the gun down."

"You're sorry for what you did, aren't you," Willie said.

"Yes," in a weak voice.

"And you're a fifi. Say it."

"I'm a fifi," Jay Jay said in a voice barely audible.

"Time to go, Jay Jay. Open your eyes and take your medicine like a man."

"Open your eyes you piece of shit. Take it like a man. Look at me."

Jay Jay looked at Willie.

"Now you know what we all felt like when you made fun of us. Not so nice is it."

He pulled the trigger. Jay Jay put his hands up to his face.

There was a tremendous roar and then silence. Willie's ears began to ring.

Jay Jay stared in amazement, as if to say, I can't believe I'm alive.

"It's a starter's pistol, Jay Jay. I got it from your desk. It's amazing that a World War Two hero like you can't tell a real gun from a fake. You never fought in World War Two, did you Jay Jay?"

"You rotten little bastard. I'm going to have you arrested. I'm going to have them throw the book at you," Jay Jay thundered.

"You go to the cops and I go to the Montreal Star. I can see the headline now.

‘Local Gym Teacher Linked to Suicide of Fifi.’ How do you think the burghers of the Town of Notre Dame will like that? How do you think the kids will treat you when they realize you were bested by a kid -- and a Jew at that? I'd let it go."

He put the gun down and walked away.

That never happened – except in Willie’s head. It was just a fantasy that kept repeating itself over and over in his mind. Willie couldn’t make it work. He realized that Jay Jay would probably be able to recognize a starter’s pistol from the real thing, so he tried his fantasy with a gun that fires blanks:

“You’re not hurt, Jay Jay. The gun fires blanks. I got it on the Main. A guy sold it to me for 35 bucks. I’m surprised you can’t tell a gun that fires blanks from the real thing.”

But that didn’t work either. Willie wasn’t savvy enough to buy a gun on the Main -- St. Lawrence Blvd, the anything-goes street that divides English and French Montreal. So he put his anger away until there was a time he could use it.

PART TWO: CHARLIE

The Child is father of the man;
And I wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

--*Wordsworth*

And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I touched a berry to a thread
And caught a little silver trout,

--*William Butler Yeats,*

"The Song of Wandering Aengus"

Meaning, if anything,
All that lives
To the imagination's tongue,

-- *Denise Levertov,*

"O Taste and See"

Who needs meaning anyway?
I'd trade it any day
For a very fine view.

--*Sandy Denny,*

"No End"

GREENWICH VILLAGE, 1961

IT's a Saturday in early October and the dazzling afternoon sun is dancing on the Italian fountain in the little park. I'm sitting on a stool by the front window of Joe's Pizza at Sixth Avenue and Bleecker Street, watching the Checker cabs growling up the street, their hoods as broad and angry as the faces of bulls. They jockey for position, trying to shoulder each other out of the way, looking like mechanical monsters trying to get through a narrow pass. I eat my two slices of pizza slowly. They do not sell pizza by the slice in Montreal. This is new. Lots of things are new here. People take the subway. They practically live in delis. In Montreal, you go to a delicatessen to buy a smoked meat sandwich.

In the passing parade are men in porkpie hats, fine women with long legs and waving hair, and hunched-over bums who appear to walk by moving their shoulders from side to side. Dancing the dance of a caterpillar. A blonde on a motor scooter has circled the area twice – or at least, I've seen her pass twice. Long waving hair.

The sky is powder blue. The sun is casting delicate, dotted shadows on the limestone buildings across the street. The warm, humid air makes it look like the shadows are dancing. The sparkling light on the fountain catches my eye again. I am a few weeks into my first semester at NYU and as I look out the window, I think how lucky I am to be spending a year in New York, the center of the universe, 300 miles from the city of bloated bourgeois bigotry.

I think the blonde just drove past again. From the walls of the pizzeria, “Blue Rondo a La Turk” pours from JBL L100 speakers, the kind Jean-Louis owned. The music seeps into me. The notes of Paul Desmond’s saxophone become more clearly defined and take longer to decay. The room begins to expand. The world is screaming. And I just sit there and listen to it scream.

A few minutes later, I’m walking to my building on Jones Street when a little sprite who barely comes up to my waist rushes up to me, gives me a fierce hug and shouts, “Daddy, daddy!”

She has hair the color of honey that is woven into a long braid and intense dark blue eyes. “I’m not your daddy,” I insist, but she won’t let go.

“Yes, you are. Yes, you are,” she insists.

I try to remove her hands, but she bats my hands away and hangs on for dear life. She looks up at me with eyes that could bore a hole in concrete.

“You’re not going to leave again, are you? Promise me you’re not going to leave again,” she says.

I’m trapped. I don’t know what to do. I can feel her thumbs digging into my back. If I remove her hands, I might hurt her. People are giving me curious stares. I look around desperately for a parent or somebody to whom this little creature belongs and see a woman on the stoop laughing hysterically.

“Charlie, dear, let go of the man. He’s not your father,” she says when she realizes I’m staring daggers at her.

But the girl doesn’t budge until the woman comes down and pulls her away.

“You look like her father,” she explains. “She misses him. He lives in Cleveland and she hasn’t seen him for quite a while.”

The woman is attractive, about my height, has dark hair and is stylishly dressed in a brown leather jacket, jeans and short black boots.

“You live in our building, don’t you? I think I’ve seen you,” she says.

“Yes, I live on the third floor in the back. It’s a shoebox -- but at least it’s my shoebox,” I say.

“We live on the fourth floor,” she says. “I’m Gina, by the way,” she says, holding out her hand, “and this is Charlie – Charlotte.” At the mention of her name, the little girl hides behind her mother’s back and looks out at me.

“I’m Willie,” I say, shaking her hand.

“I was just going to make a cup of coffee,” Gina says. “Would you like one?”

“That would be great,” I say, and we trudge up the four floors, Charlie walking ahead of her mother and turning around to give me silly stares. I growl at her and she shrieks in mock fright.

When Gina opens the door, Charlie is greeted excitedly by her two cats, Harmonica, who is grey, and Esau, who is orange with tiger stripes. They mew and rub their heads against her legs. She seems to control them with an invisible magic wand. She waves her hands and says, “Go away, cats,” and they run away. Then she says, “Come back, cats,” and they come back. They follow her wherever she goes, like children following the Pied Piper.

The front door opens onto the kitchen, which is decorated with a print of a yellow sun. The kitchen leads to the living room on the left and the bedroom on the right. The living room, which is rectangular, faces the street and has a large window that looks out on the top of a leafy

tree. The bedroom, where Gina and Charlie sleep, is somewhat square and its window also faces the street. It is quite a bit smaller than my studio.

That's one thing about New York that strikes me as strange. Everybody lives in shoeboxes or in tiny spaces that could serve as cages for animals. In Montreal, everyone has plenty of space. It's taken for granted.

I sit on the sofa and watch the leaves of the tree waving in the breeze. They look like a head disconnected from the body. Charlie has taken refuge behind a brown bentwood rocker and is having an intense conversation with two dolls, speaking furiously to one of them. Esau, the orange cat, has climbed into her lap.

Gina makes espresso on a stove-top maker and serves it with long, crunchy, almond-flavored biscuits. Delicious. She tells me that Charlie is six and that she is an editor on the national desk of the World Wide Wire service. I don't exactly know what that is but decide not to ask. She and her husband, Harry from Cleveland, separated two years ago and now he is back in Cleveland. She pronounces his name Herry. I snicker. But being more tactful than I usually am, I don't press for more details about their breakup.

Gina has moist, walnut-colored eyes, dark hair flecked with red like Eliane's and she talks with her hands. She is friendly and disarming. She leans her head to one side or the other when she speaks and looks me directly in the eye. I look somewhere at her forehead or look away. I find it nearly impossible to look someone in the eye.

I'm from Montreal and am going to NYU for a year after having attended McGill for a while, I tell her, immediately realizing I've probably said too much for a first meeting.

"Sounds like you were suspended," she says, giving me a mock-stern look.

"No, I wasn't suspended," I say, "I dropped out."

I lower my eyes. “It’s a long story. I didn’t sit around and do nothing. I had a job in a bookstore. I earned almost enough money to go to school here for a year – I always wanted to come to New York -- but I’ll probably have to find a part-time job.”

“You could be a copy boy for us. We’re always looking for copy boys – mostly because the pay is so shitty,” she says.

“I like to write and I’ve thought of becoming a journalist, but I don’t think I’d be any good at it. I’m not very aggressive and I don’t think I could ever write a story on deadline.”

“Well, think about it,” she says.

I tell her I love living in New York. It’s so alive. There are so many people and they are all out front. They don’t hide their personalities. For example, Joe’s pizza, one of the few places I’ve gotten to know, is a hive of activity. People order loudly and they eat loudly, smacking their lips. In Montreal, people order with their eyes down and take away pizza in boxes to eat at home. “In New York, it’s like being at a carnival,” I say. “In Montreal, in the suburb where I live, you might see a person go by every hour and they barely acknowledge you if you pass them on the street.”

“I know what you mean,” Gina says.

Charlie holds out one of her dolls and says that “he was so very bad that I had to re-BUKE him.” She repeats re-Buke him as if she’s just learned a new word. She retreats behind the rocker then comes out, holding her hands over her eyes and waits there until I do the same. Then she takes her hands off her eyes and when I do the same, she covers them and giggles. She growls at me and when I growl back at her, she ducks back behind the rocker in mock fright.

It’s getting late and I have studying to do, so I thank Gina for the espresso. She walks me to the door. As I’m leaving, I spot a guitar case leaning against a kitchen wall.

“Do you play?” I ask.

“A little,” she says. “Do you play?”

“A little,” I say. “I have a very crappy Stella guitar – 23 bucks.”

“Mine’s a Martin,” she says. “Maybe I’ll let you play it sometime.”

Just as I’m walking out the door, Charlie runs up and says, “Goodbye, daddy.”

Before I can even roll my eyes, she runs back into the living room.

That afternoon, I decide it would be a good time to get the phone call to my mother over with. I get on my bed so I can watch the sunset as I talk. I can’t see the sunset directly because I’m on the third floor and the other buildings arranged around the spacious courtyard are five and six stories tall. But if I lie on my bed, I can see the setting sun reflected in the windows of the other buildings. The light goes from salmon to rose to deep crimson. Beautiful.

I dial the number and my mother answers.

“Son,” she says, “son,” as if I’d just returned from a trip to Antarctica instead of living 300 miles away in one of the largest cities in the world.

“How are you?” she says. “It’s so good to hear your voice. Tell me about yourself.”

When she was 14, my mother wanted to be an actress.

I tell her that I’m going to class, that I met Gina and her incredibly cute daughter, Charlie, and that I spend a lot of time wandering around and getting to know the city. “I love doing that,” I say. “The houses are so old, like in Europe. It’s so different from Montreal.”

Wrong thing to say.

“I don’t see how anyone could like New York,” she says. “It’s so dirty and there’s so much crime.” A broken record.

“Oh, come on, ma,” I say. “You used to tell me that when you were younger, you used to love coming down here to visit Aunt Pearl and Uncle Izzie.” They moved to Florida a few years ago or else I probably would have had to live with them.

“It’s changed,” my mother replies. “It’s not the same.”

The color of the sun has changed to crimson and there’s a yellow line thin as a lightning bolt running through it.

My mother tells me that Uncle Hersh is unhappy that I moved out of his apartment in Brooklyn and that she ran into Ruthie’s mother at the synagogue and Ruthie would very much like it if I gave her a call so we can stay in touch.

I tell her that I don’t think Hersh cared one way or the other whether I stayed or went as long as I didn’t touch his records. I say I’ll think about giving Ruthie a call. (Good Jewish girl, kept pushing my hand away.) I don’t tell her about Holly, sparing myself a lecture about dating a shiksa – the goyim will never accept you.

“Have you given any more thought about what you’re going to do?” she says, sounding like she’s asking if I’ve made a decision between two used cars.

“I’m not going into medicine, if that’s what you mean,” I say. “I can’t stand the sight of blood and besides, I’ll never have the marks.”

“You’d have the marks if you applied yourself,” she says. I let it drop.

My father gets on the line, asks me how I am and says he thinks we should cut this short because it’s long distance.

My mother gets back on and says there was something she forgot to tell me.

“That boy called,” she says.

That boy was the name she used for Jean-Louis.

“Jean-Louis? Jean-Louis was calling from heaven? I don’t think so, ma.”

“No, not Jean-Louis,” she says, getting impatient. “Simon.”

“Simon? What the hell did he want? I haven’t spoken to him in two years. I never thought I’d hear from him again.”

“He wanted your phone number. I said I would ask you first. Should I give it to him?”

“I don’t know. Let me think about it,” I say. “I could always call him. I know the number.”

“He’s not living at home. He’s got his own apartment.”

“Well, let me think about it. Frankly, Simon is the last person I want to talk to.”

Wow, I think after we hang up. Simon must want something.

The next afternoon, I go off on one of my wanderings. I am crossing the street with my head down – usual for me -- when I run into the blonde on the motor scooter I saw yesterday when I was at Joe’s. More accurately, she runs into me. She is riding her motor scooter on West Fourth Street when she knocks me down, sending my black, horned-rim glasses flying. They crash to the sidewalk and break in half. She stops 10 feet away.

“Are you hurt?” she asks.

“No ... well ... just a little,” I reply shyly, brushing off my clothes. “My glasses are broken.”

She helps me to a stoop, looking very contrite.

Though I am a little stunned, I can’t help but notice that she is striking. Her eyes sparkle and she has long blonde hair that peaks out of a green camouflage hat. It falls over her breasts and down to the middle of her back.

“I didn’t mean to hit you,” she says. “I guess I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“I was the one who wasn’t looking where he was going,” I insist timidly. “I was in my usual fog.”

She fishes around in the tool box under the seat and finds a roll of black electrical tape. She pulls out a length, cuts it off with her teeth and mends my glasses.

She puts my glasses back on my face, adjusts them and then steps back to see the effect.

She adjusts them again, as if she is adjusting a newly hung picture, and steps back a second time.

“It could be considered a fashion statement, but you do look a little weird,” she says, shaking her head. “I’ll buy you new frames.”

“Oh, you don’t have to,” I say. “These are pretty old-fashioned and I’ve been thinking of getting rid of them for some time. I have contact lenses, but I keep forgetting to take them out at night so I wake up with my eyes all scratchy.”

“Well, at least let me take you home,” she says.

“I live just around the corner.”

“Hop on, I’m out for my afternoon ride. I’ll take you there.”

“You’ll never be able to move. I’m too heavy.”

“Nonsense! This baby’s got power. Get on. Put your arms around my waist. Don’t be afraid. I won’t bite.”

I am not in the habit of putting my arms around girls I barely know, but I do as I am told.

She turns around to check for traffic and as she does, she presses her large breasts into my chest. Something stirs.

“Ready?” she says.

I nod.

She kicks down on the starter pedal and we go off with a vroom, weaving in and out of the traffic on Sixth Avenue as I sit with my heart in my boots, wondering what I have agreed to.

“Look out! You almost hit that cab!” I shout after Holly comes within inches of hitting a taxi, triggering a squeal of brakes as a cab stops suddenly. There is the heavy gasp of air brakes as a bus lurches to a halt to avoid hitting the taxi.

“Learn to drive, fuckers!” she shouts, hoisting her right middle finger and continuing her wild ride, dipping to a 45-degree angle as she rounds corners.

I can feel my heart pounding in my neck when she finally pulls up in front of a café with a white awning.

“That was fun, wasn’t it,” she says, with heavy emphasis on the word fun.

“This isn’t home,” I protest, breathing rapidly.

“It’s my favorite café,” she says. “Come on, be a sport, I’ll buy you a coffee.”

We sit at a small round table with ice cream chairs. She has long legs and is wearing a tan leather vest over a dark green T-shirt, jeans and black boots. She extends her hand.

“My name is Holly ...

“Holly Golightly ...

“Holly Golightly Mippipopolous.”

She giggles.

“Oh, so you’re a Greek count who appears in ‘The Sun Also Rises,’” I say.

“In my previous life,” she says without batting an eye.

“I’m Willie,” I say. “In my previous life I was Truman Capote.”

She laughs.

“Is Holly really your first name?”

She looks me sharply in the eye.

“Well, this week it is,” she says, as if confiding a secret. “No, no, no! Of course, it’s my name. Why would I lie about it?”

“I just love Holly Golightly,” she adds. “She’s my heroine. She’s the woman I want to be. She’s free. ‘You can’t cage a wild thing.’ Remember?”

She bursts into song, drumming on the table and laughing: “Wild thing, da, da, da, da, da, wild thing.”

The waitress hurries over and takes our order.

Holly tells me she is 24, four years older than me, and is a military brat who has lived all over, including Georgia and California. She works part-time in a bar and is somewhere between her junior and senior years at NYU because she’s taken off time to earn money – plus traveling around and generally falling behind.

Joan Baez is playing on the speakers:

The river of Jordan is chilly and cold,
It chills the body but it warms the soul

Holly has a straight nose, a wide sexy mouth with dark red lips, deep-set eyes and high cheekbones that reflect the light. Her eyes are a combination of green and gold, not completely green but not as yellow as a cat’s eyes. It is a color I’ve never seen before.

She is the kind of girl that, under normal conditions, would not give me the time of day. She is the kind of girl that, under normal conditions, I would not be able to say a word to. But she is so engaging that I forget that I’m shy.

“Did you grow up in the city?” she asks.

“No, I grew up in Montreal,” I say. “I’m just here for a year to go to NYU.”

“You’re going to leave me after a year,” she says. “It’s going to take you a year just to get to know me. Why don’t you stay and graduate from NYU?”

“I only have enough money for a year and my parents could never afford to pay for the other three years. They just don’t have much money,” I say. “I went to McGill for a while, but I didn’t like it. Veddy British. Pip, pip and all that. The Harvard of Canada, you know. I didn’t fit in at all. So I dropped out and worked in a bookstore.”

“You could get a job and pay your own way – I work,” she says.

“I’ve thought of that, but what would I do – work in a bookstore, again?” I say. “Besides, if I don’t go back, it’ll be a real wrench. I love my parents – as nutty as they are. And they miss me terribly.”

“You’ve got to cut the cord sometimes,” she says. “The older you get, the harder it becomes. I’ll bet you’re a good boy who calls his mother once a week. I call my parents every three or four months.”

“Yes, I call my mother once a week,” I say. “I promised I would. Lord knows, I have nothing to say.”

Holly takes off her hat and tosses back her mane of blonde hair. The ends catch the sun and for a moment, her face is dark and the fringes of her hair look like they’re on fire.

“What courses are you taking?” she asks.

“New York 101,” I say. “I spend most of my time wandering around the city. It’s fantastic. I’m taking pre-med, but the only course I really like is English. I didn’t know what else to take. My mother wants me to be a doctor. She really wants me to be a doctor.”

“Every mother wants her son to be a doc-ta,” she says in a Jewish accent.

“What do you want to be?” I ask.

“A writer – or a comedian,” she says.

“I think I’d like to be a writer, but I’m not very good,” I say.

Her face catches the afternoon light behind her in such a way that I think there is a second person outlined in her face, like a counterpoint to a main musical theme.

She is direct and tomboyish and flirty and sexy. She wears a thin gold necklace that quietly illuminates her face. She keeps opening and closing her vest, drawing my attention to her full breasts. When she laughs, which is often, she slaps her hands on her knees and then hits me with her right hand.

Holly is quiet for a moment, then suddenly looks up and says, “That’s a bitchin’ boy.”

Before I can say anything, she goes on, “He’s cute. I’m going to go out on a date with that boy. Do you think he’ll want to go out with me?”

“I’m sure he’ll want to go out with you,” I say.

Later, “There’s another cute boy. I don’t think he’ll want to go out with me because I’m not pretty enough.”

“I think you’re wrong,” I say.

“No, I’m not pretty enough.”

“Yes, I can’t take my eyes off you,” I insist. The words just come out of me. I have no control over what I’m saying.

“You *would* say that. You’re my friend.”

She looks at me for a moment and commands me to take off my bandaged glasses. “You look like a spaceman,” she says. “It’s beginning to bother me.”

I take them off and she looks at me intently and says, “You look really handsome without your glasses. You should wear your contacts more often.”

I am stunned. No woman other than my mother has ever told me I'm handsome. I make a weak attempt to return the compliment.

"You've got a really cool hat," I say. "Where did you get it?"

"At a little shop about two blocks from here. Do you want me to take you there?"

"I'm not in the market for a woman's hat."

She frowns. "They have men's hats, too, silly. Come on, let's go."

The two blocks turn out to be at least a mile -- all at breakneck speed -- with Holly sometimes turning to me and saying, "Great, huh?"

After we arrive, Holly tries on a million hats, running to the mirror and then running back to try another. I choose a dark brown fedora with a tiny brim because I think it sets off my scruffy beard.

"You look like a new man," she says.

"I look like a new man who's survived a train wreck," I reply.

Holly says she has to go because she's going out tonight and has to get ready. She offers me a ride home.

This is a very original person, I think as we speed through the narrow streets, overhung by trees whose leaves are turning red.

She drops me off outside my building, fishes through her bag for a scrap of paper and writes her phone number on it.

"Call me," she says.

She speeds off, waving her right arm high in the air.

In the evening, there is a knock on the door. It's Charlie holding her pigtail in her right hand and Gina, holding a plate of cookies.

“Charlie wanted to say good night to you,” she says, “and I baked some cookies, so I thought I’d bring you some. Help the starving student.”

“You’re right I am starving,” I say, grabbing a cookie. “Mmmm, oatmeal and raisin. My favorite.”

“Enjoy them,” she says. “Bring back the plate when you’re done.”

“Good night Da—Willie, Daddy Willie,” Charlie says.

“Good night, honey.”

She lifts up her face and I kiss her on the forehead.

Gina stands there for a second and I give her an awkward hug. I watch them go up the stairs, Charlie holding her mother’s hand. Charlie looks back over her shoulder and waves to me. Gina smiles.

The next day, I resume the wandering that was so rudely interrupted the day before. What I love best about New York is that it lets me dream. I’ve wandered through the streets of the Village, imagining I am meandering through the streets of old Paris and Rome. I’ve looked at the rabbit-hutch houses on Patchin Place, an alleyway where e.e. cummings lives, picturing myself driving a horse cart down the narrow street in the previous century. I’ve heard chilling screams from the nearby, fortress-like Women’s House of Detention, which is next to the Jefferson Market Courthouse, a Victorian building that looks like it has an arm pointing to the sky.

This time, I go to the Upper West Side, where I’ve never seen so many people on the street at once, except perhaps during Christmas on Ste-Catherine Street, the main shopping street

in Montreal. The people look like they are attached to a conveyer belt that brings them down the street, takes them under the street, brings them up and takes them down the street again.

Men in suits, men in shorts and running shoes, kids in jeans or khakis with long hair or buzz cuts, mothers dragging kids, mothers telling kids to behave, smartly dressed women gesturing to each other with their hands. Men with beards and yarmulkes. Men drinking cans of beer and gesturing. Honking of horns, squawking of peddlers. *Sah! Excuse me, Sah!* There is a woman wearing an ivory dress and a white headdress that bobs and dips, making her look like a swan.

I feel I am a camera lens and someone is focusing me on the street life. *They are talking to me. I can't quite make out what they are saying, but they are talking to me.* I begin making up stories of who the people are, where they live and what their lives are like. I sit in a café and linger over coffee just so I can continue watching them.

It's Wednesday evening and I've just returned from NYU when there is a loud banging on the door.

"Willie, Willie, are you there? Are you there? Open up."

It's Gina, wearing a very fancy black dress.

"I have an emergency," she says, almost out of breath. "I'm meeting someone for dinner, the babysitter can't make it and the nanny can't stay. Could you please take care of Charlie? I'm at my wit's end. I can't find anyone else. I'm sorry I banged so loudly on your door, but I came down a few minutes ago and there was no answer."

"Sure, why not," I say and follow her upstairs.

"I've just made brownies," she says. "They're on the counter. Help yourself."

“Charlie goes to sleep at eight, so it shouldn’t be too hard. I’ll try not to be too late,” she says as she’s putting on her coat. “My guitar’s in the closet if you get bored.” She grabs my hand with both of hers, smiles and rushes out.

Charlie is watching cartoons on TV, her long honey-colored hair spread down to her shoulders like a veil. She barely acknowledges my presence.

After 15 minutes, the program ends and she turns to me and says, “Okay, let’s play.” Then she changes her mind. “I want a brownie and milk.”

I give her a glass of milk and a brownie and take one myself. “Good, aren’t they,” she says, looking at me with her dark blue eyes.

“The best,” I say.

After we finish, we sit in the living room.

“Would you like a cat? They’re very nice,” she says.

Without giving me the chance to say yes or no, she says, “Esau, go to Willie,” and the orange cat jumps into my lap.

“You certainly have amazing control over these cats,” I say.

“I’m a magician,” she says. “Don’t you realize I have magical powers?”

The cat mews until it catches my attention and then turns over on its back and lifts its paws into the air.

“He wants you to scratch his stomach,” Charlie says.

I scratch the cat’s stomach and it grabs my hand with its little paws and playfully tries to bite me.

“Don’t hurt Willie,” Charlie says, and the cat turns over and nestles in my lap, purring loudly.

Charlie gets up.

“Chase me,” she says, and runs into the bedroom.

She stands at the head of the bed, bouncing up and down, and orders me to stand at the foot of the bed. “Try and catch me,” she says.

When I run to one side of the bed, she runs to the other and escapes me. (I really don’t try that hard to catch her, if the truth be told.) We do that a few dozen times and then I get the bright idea of feinting to one side and then running to the other. I catch her and she squeals with delight.

“Let’s do that again,” she says.

This time, she waits until after I’ve done my feinting before running to the other side. That way, she outwits me. I try a double feint and that outsmarts her. I catch her.

“Again,” she says with glee. “Again.”

At 7:30, she suddenly out of steam.

“I’m exhausted, Willie,” she says. “Put me to bed.”

I tuck her in, kiss her on the forehead and walk away.

“Hug! Hug!” she roars. “That’s no way to put a little girl to sleep. You’ve got to give her a hug.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, and give her a big hug.

“That’s the way to do it,” she says, and is asleep in a minute.

As if they are guarding her, the two cats take up positions on either side of the foot of the bed, sitting with their forepaws tucked under them like little statues.

After Charlie goes to sleep, I watch TV but get bored, so I open the butterscotch guitar case leaning against the kitchen wall. Inside is a large, dreadnought-style

guitar with a blonde wood top and a mahogany body. Inside the sound hole are the words Martin D-18. The guitar has the patina of age and I can see the wood's close grain. When I pluck the top strings, they ring like a bell. This is a great guitar, I tell myself, a dream guitar.

My \$23 Stella has a tinny sound and I think it's made out of plywood. I've read that bluesmen like it, but I don't want to be a bluesman. A folksinger, maybe. I got the guitar so I could accompany myself when I sing – I think my voice isn't too bad -- but then I realized that I hate singing in front of people. I get incredibly nervous and my mind goes blank.

The next evening, Gina comes down to thank me again, bringing a plate of brownies.

“Was she a terror?” she asks.

“She was no trouble,” I say. “She's lot of fun. The thing she did with the cat is amazing. She ordered him to sit in my lap and he did. She must have special powers.”

“You're easily impressed,” Gina says, pursing her lips and frowning. “I've seen her try that a thousand times and the cat just stands there.”

“Oh,” I say.

“I played your guitar,” I add. “I hope you don't mind. I never played a Martin before. It really has a beautiful sound.”

“I don't mind at all,” she says, and proceeds to give me an elementary lesson on the guitar:

“It's a Martin D-18. Elvis Presley owned one. It was his first guitar. It has a spruce top and a mahogany body. Mahogany is a mellow-sounding wood so the D-18 is a mellow-sounding guitar. Elvis later bought a Martin D-28, which has a spruce top and a rosewood body.

Rosewood is a harder wood than mahogany, so it sounds brighter. The D-28 is a brighter

sounding guitar than the D-18, the top strings stand out more. Aren't you impressed that a girl knows all that about guitars."

"Very impressed," I say.

"It's not my guitar. It's Herry's," she says. "It's 25 years old. It's probably worth a fortune. He left it here when he went back to Cleveland. He promised to pick it up one day."

"He just up and left one day?" I ask, trying my best not to sound nosy.

"He said New York was too much for him," she says. "He went to France and now he's back on the copy desk of the Cleveland Plain Dealer."

"What's a copy desk?" I ask. "I really don't know much about newspapers. I only used to read the front page of The Montreal Star."

"The copy desk is the place where you edit stories and put headlines on them," Gina replies.

"Sounds very boring."

"It can be, but I like it," she says. "It's not like being a reporter. You don't have to go out in the rain."

"I didn't know you're from Cleveland," I say.

"I'm not. I'm from New Jersey," she says. "But when you're in journalism, you move around a bit. You hardly ever get your first job in the place where you grew up or went to school. My first job was on the Plain Dealer."

"You met Harry there?" I ask.

"Met, got married, had a kid. Then I got an offer to come to New York, the Big Apple, the place where everyone wants to go. I got a job on the national desk of the Worldwide Wire Service. But Harry couldn't find a full-time job, only pick-up shifts at the News and the Post, and

the whole thing fell apart. I went to work and he stayed home with Charlie, but it got to be too much for him, new wife, new baby, new place. He left two years ago, eventually returned to Cleveland, got his old job back. He keeps writing and asking me to join him.”

“But you haven’t done it?” I say.

“No, haven’t done it, thinking about it, but haven’t done it.” Then abruptly changing the subject, she says, “Why don’t you play something for me?”

“How about Tom Dooley. It’s simple, only the C and G⁷ chords.”

“Play that, then.”

I cradle the guitar in my lap and begin to play:

Hang down your head, Tom Dooley,
Hang down your head and cry,
Hang down your head, Tom Dooley,
Poor boy you’re bound to die.

“You don’t have a bad voice,” she says when I finish. She takes the guitar and begins playing “Black Girl,” a song made popular by Ledbelly.

Black girl, black girl, don’t lie to me,
Tell me where did you sleep last night,
In the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shines,
And I shivered the whole night through.

Gina plays the melody with her thumb and plucks the three upper strings of the guitar with her fingers. This is the person I heard when I first came to look at the apartment. She sings and plays with the intensity of a child, losing herself in the song.

“Well, I have to get back,” she says once she finishes. “Thanks again for taking care of Charlie.”

She hands me \$10, which I decline, saying, “You can pay me the next time.”

“I’m glad you said that,” she says, “because I need you to babysit next Sunday. I have an extra shift.”

“I’ll be happy to,” I say.

I call Holly’s number every night but there is no answer. On Friday evening, the buzzer sounds. I press the door button twice, but nothing seems to happen, so I go downstairs open the door. Standing in front of me is a stunning woman I don’t immediately recognize. She is wearing a black leather jacket, black jeans, black boots and a red beret tilted to one side.

“Aren’t you going to let me in?” she asks.

“Holly,” I suddenly realize.

“Yes, Holly,” she says. “Who did you think it was, Caspar the Friendly Ghost? Let’s go upstairs.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was in the neighborhood and I decided to drop in for a visit.”

“How did you find out where I live?”

“I dropped you off, genius. When I got here, I pressed all the buzzers until I got somebody to respond.”

“My place is a mess,” I say.

“Yeah, I know. Men are pigs. But my place is a mess, too.”

Once we get upstairs, I hurriedly make the bed and sit down on it. Holly sits on the desk chair. She opens her jacket, which zips diagonally down the front, revealing a slinky grey silk blouse. She crosses her legs and looks slightly to one side, as if she wants to be admired.

“I like your apartment. It’s cozy.” She looks around and notices the prism. “Why do you have a prism on your desk?”

“It splits the light into three colors, like reducing things to their elements. Sometimes, if the light is in the right position, you get a little rainbow on the wall. I just saw it in a store and decided to buy it.”

“I called you every night this week,” I say.

“Oh, yeah, the phone doesn’t work.”

“Doesn’t work?”

“They sort of shut it off because I forgot to pay the bill.”

“Why didn’t you pay the bill?”

“I’ll pay it. Don’t worry.”

If your phone doesn’t work, maybe you shouldn’t have given me your phone number, I think, somewhat annoyed.

“Do you often go over to the homes of boys you barely know?” I ask.

“If they’re cute, I do,” she replies.

She is quieter than the first time I met her and acts as if she’s on display and enjoys being enjoyed. She turns her face slightly to the right.

She is devilishly pretty and suddenly, my feet get up and walk over to the desk. I put my arms around her and try to kiss her, but she ducks out of my grasp and stands up.

“They’re playing ‘Breathless’ at the Thalia. I want to go,” she says in a mock imperious voice.

“What’s the Thalia?”

“It’s the art house on the West Side that everybody goes to. Haven’t you heard of it?”

“No. I’m a new arrival, remember? Where is it?”

“Broadway and 95th.”

“Do we have to go by motor scooter?”

“No, we can take the subway, CHICKen.”

As we are almost out the door, I quickly turn around.

“I forgot my hat,” I say.

“Do you like your hat?”

“Love it,” I say. “It makes me a better me.”

“How many times have you seen ‘Breathless’?” I ask her.

“This will be my sixth. Belmondo is so cute.”

“And how many times have you seen ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s’?”

“A dozen.”

As we walk to the subway, Holly stops two women to compliment them on their outfits.

Men give her sidelong glances.

Outside the Thalia, there are men with slightly long hair who look like they’ve just smoked a joint and women with long skirts, granny glasses and lots of bracelets.

The theater is a sort of ramshackle place – seats that don’t come down or lean one way or the other -- that looks like your grandmother’s screening room, if your grandmother had a screening room. It smells of popcorn and mothballs.

As the movie begins, her red lips look incredibly desirable and I suddenly kiss her and this time, she doesn’t resist. She kisses back, a long kiss. After that I kiss her as she sells the International Herald Tribune on the Champs Elysee, as she and Jean-Paul Belmondo talk in her hotel room and as Belmondo imitates Humphrey Bogart’s gestures in many mirrors.

The only time she pushes me away is when Belmondo, a young hood, is mortally wounded by the cops and he staggers down the street in what seems to me to be a parody of an American film gangster's death.

"God is he *cute*," she says.

After the movie is over, she leads me to the New Yorker bookstore at 89th and Broadway, where we climb the stairs and sit in little chairs on the second floor, taking books from the shelves and reading them.

"Was that a movie about gangsters or was that a movie about movies?" I ask her.

"Probably both," she shrugs, and goes back to her book.

I show her "O Taste and See" by Denise Levertov, my favorite book of poetry. She looks at it for a moment, then says she's hungry and could we go to her favorite café.

We take a taxi to the Village and without warning, she starts singing "Runaway" by Del Shannon in a loud and somewhat off-key voice.

"And I wonder," clap, clap, clap
"I wah-wah-wah-wah-wonder,
"Why," clap, clap, clap
"Why, why, why, why, why she ran away,"
"My little runaway,"
"Run, run, run, run, runaway."

I join in on the last two lines and now we have two lunatics singing in the back of a cab.

"That was pretty good," the driver says when we get out.

"My record is coming out in two weeks," Holly says.

"Really? You're a singer? What's your name?" the driver asks.

"I'll never tell. You'll know when you see my picture on the record cover."

The cabbie drives off, impressed.

Holly bursts out laughing, almost doubling over.

“Ha, ha . . . ha, ha, ha, ha.”

She has a musical laugh. It has six beats. First ha, ha, then a little pause and then ha, ha, ha, ha. Usually, the laugh is accompanied by her slapping her knees, but this time she grabs my shoulders to keep from falling down. Then she gives me a little hug and we kiss.

In the café, we order burgers and the first of two glasses of red wine. Holly listens to the conversation of a couple at a nearby table.

“It’s about anal sex,” she whispers gleefully. “She doesn’t enjoy attacks from the rear. He has the proportions of a prize bull.”

She giggles. She raises one eyebrow and then the other, a pretty neat trick if you ask me. I redden.

“You’re shy, aren’t you?” she says. “I had a boyfriend who was shy. He was Jewish, too.”

“What was he like?”

“Obsessive and very worried about money – just kidding,” she says. “He was insecure and confused but very caring. We lived together for two years. I just broke up with him two months ago.”

“Why did you break up?”

“It just wasn’t going anywhere.” She looks away.

“And you didn’t care that he was Jewish?” I say. “You must have been told the same things about the Jews that we were told about the goyim.”

“I did care that he was Jewish. Jews makes the best husbands,” she says, almost with a sneer.

We say nothing for a few moments, then the second glass of wine begins to lubricate my tongue.

“I love to sit in a café, picking up snatches of conversation and filling in the rest,” I say. “It’s one of my happiest moments.”

“Mine, too,” she says.

“When I’m in a café,” I continue, “I go to a special place in my mind, a place where everything is clear, everything is sparkling, there are currents of warm blood flowing inside me and everyday things suggest poems.”

Holly nods, but it’s clear I’ve lost her. She wants an ice cream soda. We order two rounds of those and after she finishes each of hers, she makes a loud slurping sound with her straw and laughs her six-beat laugh.

We walk home and kiss maybe a dozen times. Her pale eyes reflect the smoky light of early morning. She lives in a white townhouse on Gay Street, a house that looks like it’s perched upon a distant hill as we round the corner. At her doorstep, I look at her for a deep second.

“Next time,” she says.

She starts to walk inside, then quickly turns around. “I’m having some people over next Saturday. Please come.”

She makes it sound like a command.

About a month after Jean-Louis’s suicide, I was hit with a major wave of depression. I couldn’t stop blaming myself for his death. I couldn’t sleep in my own bed. I slept on the couch in the living room, near the TV seat. At four in the morning I would get up and go to my own bed. I couldn’t talk to people. I would have terrible dreams. Sometimes I would just break out crying for no reason. I lost 15 pounds. Things didn’t get better

when I started McGill. I didn't talk. I couldn't concentrate. I was just in a fog. After a month, I went to the administration and said I wanted to withdraw. They were nice about it. They said they understood. They said I could come back when I felt better. They helped me get a job in the bookstore in the basement of the Arts Building. Later, I got a job in the Classics bookstore on St. Catherine St. About December or January, the fog began to lift, but I became very, very angry. Angry about the bullying I got from Jay Jay, from Simon. Angry at a world that decrees that men must fit into a narrow masculine mold.

I saw a psychiatrist who said I shouldn't feel guilty about Jean-Louis's death because I wasn't a trained therapist and I did more than most people would have done. When I told him I wanted to go to NYU, he said a change might be good. My parents hated the idea, but since I had the money, they couldn't stop me.

Things are better here, but still I have dreams that someone is trying to drill through my intestines. And sometimes when I'm awake, I flash back to the night the ambulance took Jean-Louis away. I've tried to force myself to forget it, but it keeps coming back. I have no control over it. I just squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head until the bitter memory goes away.

After I said I was going to New York, my parents made me promise that I would live with Uncle Hersh because I really wasn't ready to live on my own. Hersh, who had an apartment on Eastern Parkway near the Brooklyn Museum, was a tall, balding man with a frizz of white hair about his temples. He had the warmth of a metal pole, which is to say he was cold and distant, his manner reinforced by the silver spectacles he wore. Hersh wrote plays in a wife-beater undershirt at a kneehole desk near the kitchen. None of his plays were produced. If I dared speak when he was writing, he became testy. Hersh listened to jazz and had

a wonderful collection of records, but he wouldn't let me put a finger on them lest I scratch them or break the turntable's sensitive tone arm.

Hersh and his wife, Stella, were vegetarians. Stella, a tiny woman who never wore makeup, gave me a lecture on health foods, mentioning a cereal that smelled so badly she had to hold her nose to eat it. But it kept her healthy. When I thought of Stella's name, I said to myself, "Wow, she has her own Stanley Kowalski -- in an undershirt, too."

I had a room overlooking an air shaft. The light from the only window was dark gray at best. Hersh and Stella, having never had children, didn't know what to say to me. They talked to each other in a kind of shorthand I didn't understand. To show he was a good fellow, Hersh treated me to a vegetarian steak at the local vegetarian restaurant. It tasted like waxed paper, but I smiled and said it was delicious. It was clear I was a major disruption in the daily lives of people who were very set in their ways. The only way I could feel more unwelcome was if I brought home a pet boa constrictor. This was no place to be if you've just arrived in one of the world's most-exciting cities. Plus, it took an hour to get to school. So, after two weeks, I saw an ad in the NYU newspaper for a studio apartment on Jones Street and checked it out.

An older black man was playing slide guitar on the stoop. He extended his hand, saying his name was Abe and he lived on the first floor. This was a good sign. The apartment was on the third floor in the back. As I climbed the stairs, I heard a woman singing softly and playing the guitar. This was another good sign.

The apartment was about 14 by 20 feet (I measured by walking step in front of step). There was one window that faced a large courtyard where I could see the backs of buildings that were built at odd angles to each other (this was Greenwich Village after all). There was light and

it was certainly better than facing an airshaft. And if I looked hard enough and imagined hard enough, I could see little dots of people moving in the colored rectangles of the windows.

There was a small kitchen with a windowless bathroom behind it and a fireplace in the middle of the right wall. It didn't work but I could stack my books on the mantelpiece. The apartment was bare except for a black telephone on the floor. I picked it up and there was a dial tone. Wonderful! I'll have free phone service until the idiots caught on. I rented it on the spot. The rent was not much more than I was paying Hersh and the location was great. I was sure there would be a battle with my parents, but I could always threaten to drop out again. I was slowly learning how to foil my parents' attempts to control me.

As expected, there was a great gnashing of teeth and flapping of wings over my decision to move.

"Now, you have hot food and a home," my mother said. "There, you'll have to do everything for yourself." *Yep, here I have hot dog food. Yummy.*

"I eat out mostly, now," I replied.

"What happens if you get sick? Who will take care of you?" *Certainly not Hersh.*

"I'll call a doctor."

"What if you're too weak to make the call?" *Stella will make me mush.*

"I don't know. Maybe I'll die."

"Think of what you're doing. Think! Think! Uncle Hersh loves you. He wants you to stay." *In a pig's eye.*

My father got on the line.

“You’re moving to a very dangerous neighborhood,” he said. “It’s full of degenerates and criminals. I know. I lived in New York.” *Oh, you must mean homosexuals, like Jean-Louis. He was a real degenerate. That’s certainly an argument that will persuade me.*

It went on like that for 20 minutes.

Finally, I said, “Okay, I’ve thought it over. I’m doing it.” And hung up.

I packed my two suitcases quickly, grabbed my Stella and was out the door in 15 minutes, muttering the briefest of goodbyes to Hersh and Stella. I caught a cab to the Village and less than an hour later, I unlocked the door of Apartment 3R at 13 Jones St. – my very first apartment.

I unpacked my things and hung them in the closet and put my books on the mantelpiece. Since there was no bed, I slept on the floor, under jackets and shirts. The next day, I bought a bed and a desk and chair from ads in the student newspaper and got a chest of drawers from an unpainted furniture store. I picked up a gooseneck lamp from the street. I placed the bed in the corner along the left wall and the desk in the right corner so the light would be over my shoulder. I put the dresser between the fireplace and the door to the closet.

I arranged my desk carefully. The lamp went on the left and my radio went in the middle. The prism I bought on a whim went in the left corner and in the right corner went the dozen little men dressed in brown that represent Mr. Moore, the father of my high school friend, Ollie. Carefully arranging these things gave me a sense of stability. I put my broken glasses in the dresser, to be repaired – or thrown out.

In addition to the fantasy of the brown men going into a diner and asking for a nice ham and cheese sandwich, I have another fantasy. I imagine two concentric circles of men dressed in

blue work shirts and khakis. The men on the inside, going clockwise, smile and the men on the outside, going counterclockwise, say, “Lovely day.”

Every time I think of this, I begin to laugh.

In addition to Gina and Charlie, my neighbors include Rosie Sullivan, a pretty, aspiring actress about 25 who works as a waitress at an Irish bar in the Bronx at night and goes out on auditions during the day. She lives in the studio on the fifth floor. Then there is Mr. Busy Busy, or so I’ve named him. He goes up and down the stairs at great speed, something I’ve never been able to do. Just after I moved in, I saw him coming down the stairs and tried to introduce myself, but he said, “Love to talk, but I’m just so busy, busy,” and sped off clickety-clack down the stairs. On the first floor is Abe, from whose apartment wafts the smell of incense sticks and the sound of blues guitar. In the studio below me is Dave, a mountain of a guy who has a huge chest, stands six-foot-six and weighs perhaps 250 pounds. I thought he was a guard or tackle for the NYU football team, but no, he is an architecture student at Cooper Union, having graduated from the University of Minnesota.

Dave takes me to see the Ansonia Hotel, an amazing block-long, turreted building at Broadway and 73rd Street. Saul Bellow used it as the setting for “Seize the Day.” Dave explains that the builder, William Earle Dodge Stokes, wanted the residence hotel to be self-sufficient and so, for several years, he had a farm on the roof. There was a cattle elevator to hoist cows to the farm and there were live seals in the lobby fountain. Dave takes me around to the side, on 73rd Street, and shows me the porte cochere, the covered entrance where carriages once swept in to pick up or drop off passengers so they would never ever feel a drop of rain. I stare at the porte cochere for a moment and in my mind’s eye, I see a gentleman in top hat and tails helping a lady in an evening gown alight from a carriage.

As I'm leaving for class on Tuesday morning, I'm intercepted by Abe, who says his arthritis is acting up and would I buy him a jar of liniment from Ralph, who works in the newsstand at the Sheridan Square subway station nearby? I say I won't be able to do it until the afternoon and he hands me \$10 and says that's okay because he can't make it on his own.

I have already encountered the famous Ralph, who has been nicknamed "What the fuck! Ralph" by legions of NYU students. Ralph sells dime bags of pot if he thinks he can trust you. But if he suddenly decides he doesn't like your face or if he thinks cops are lurking about – or that you might be a cop -- he sticks up his right hand and in a voice that's a cross between a crow and a strangled cat says, 'NOT NOW' or 'I'M BUSY NOW, I CAN'T TALK' -- and it's no pot for you.

Ralph is a man in his 50's who has gray hair that falls down over his eyes and looks like it's been combed by a screwdriver. He has thick glasses that he sometimes wears and sometimes doesn't, so sometimes you are greeted by a cross-eyed stare and sometimes not. He is also somewhat deaf, so sometimes he doesn't hear what you say and sometimes he hears it wrong.

Ralph also has a yellow rubber duck named Chuck that he has somehow managed to fasten to a shelf at his window. Sometimes, and apropos of nothing, he hits Chuck on the back, saying, "Fuck a duck, Chuck!" and the duck squawks six times.

Ralph was carrying on about the war in Vietnam when I first paid him a visit.

"We're fighting a war in Southeast Asia that's going to turn around and bite us in the ass," he was saying. "We say we're doing it to support democracy, but the reason we're really doing it is show we're stronger than anybody else. It's diseased masculinity."

A student objected that if Vietnam falls to the communists, the other countries around it will fall like a string of dominoes.

“No,” he said. “That’s wrong and I’ll tell you why it’s wrong. It’s wrong because we’re supporting a corrupt dictator in South Vietnam. In order to halt the march of communism, we’re supporting a corrupt dictator. That’s fucked-up foreign policy. And that’s why we’re going to lose in Southeast Asia. We always do it. We never learn.”

Ralph went on and on, working himself into a cross-eyed fury as one-by-one, his audience slipped away. I had been quietly standing on the edge of the crowd with a folded \$10 bill in my palm. I attempted to pass it to Ralph, but his eyes suddenly darted to the right and he crowed, “NOT NOW! NOT NOW! I’M BUSY.”

“What the *fuck!* Ralph!” I boomed. I looked around and was about to say, “But Ralph, there’s nobody here,” when I suddenly made the connection: That’s how Ralph got his name. As I walked away, Ralph hit Chuck on the back and said, “What the fuck! Chuck.” I heard squawks receding in the distance.

But when I go to the newsstand this afternoon, Ralph hands over a blue jar the size of a Vaseline container when I tell him I need liniment for Abe.

“Are you a *friend* of Abe’s?” he asks.

“Just moved into the building,” I say.

“I know Abe very well,” he says. “Welcome.”

Abe offers me some liniment when I give him the jar, but I say no thanks, my joints are fine, but when he has time, he can show me some tricks on the guitar. He agrees.

On Sunday, as I am taking Charlie to the park, Abe stops me and asks if I'll get him some liniment again. I say I'll stop by on our way back and see if Ralph is there.

The day is nippy but clear with white, wooly clouds. I can hear the bells ringing at Our Lady of Pompeii, a beautiful Italianate church at Bleecker and Carmine. Charlie's honey-colored hair glints in the sunlight. The small swings are all taken when we get to the park, so I strap Charlie into a big swing using my belt.

"Higher! Higher," she says when I push her, her face filled with glee. "Again. Again." After that, she goes down the baby slide about a hundred times. We go to lunch at a White Castle. Charlie isn't very interested in the little hamburgers they serve, but she loves dipping her French fries in ketchup. She turns the fries around and around in the ketchup before eating them. "I just love French fries with ketchup," she tells me, her cheeks smeared red.

On the way back, we stop at the Sheridan Square news stand and sure enough, Ralph is there. "Is that your kid," he asks when he sees Charlie.

"No, she belongs to Gina, who lives on the fourth floor. I'm just babysitting."

He hits his duck on the back. Quack, quack ... quack, quack ... quack, quack.

"Ducky," Charlie squeals. "I want that ducky."

"You can't have it. It's my ducky," Ralph says, an evil smile on his face.

"I want that ducky. I want a ducky," Charlie whines.

"Ralph, can I buy the ducky?" I ask.

"No, it's my ducky," he says. "I got it at the toy store on Bleecker Street. It's two blocks away. You can get one there."

So off we trudge to the toy store, where I buy Charlie a duck and a small basketball set that hooks over a door.

When we get back to the apartment, Charlie runs around making the duck quack. The cats run around after her. The duck quacks over and over until I think my head is going to explode. I install the basket over the bedroom door and take a shot.

I miss.

“Here, let me try,” Charlie says. She shoots the ball underhand, *but it doesn’t go as high as the basket.*

“Not even close,” I say. “Stand closer.”

“Not even close,” she says. “That’s not very supportive. That’s not making me feel better.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

“Hmmm. I can see you’re not very conversant with the terms of modern American psychobabble,” she says with a mischievous grin.

“Where did you learn that?”

“From my babysitter.”

We take a few more shots. She gets better. The cats run around wildly.

We take a milk and brownies break.

“Superman or Batman?” she asks, a milk mustache on her upper lip.

“Superman or Batman . . . what?”

“Who do you like better, Superman or Batman?”

“Superman.”

“Why?”

“He can do more things?”

“Batman or Spiderman?”

“Batman. I like his fancy car. I like his cape.”

She grins.

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No, not really,” I say. “I’ve sort of been seeing someone, but I wouldn’t really call her a girlfriend.”

“My mother could be your girlfriend,” she says.

“Your mother is a lovely woman, but I’m really too young for her.”

“No you’re not.”

“Yes, I am. She must be – she has a child – she must be 35 to 40.

“You don’t know anything about women. My mother is barely 31.”

“And I’m not even 21.

“In 10 years, is that going to matter, tell me?” she says.

“What are you, a therapist?”

“You don’t know anything about women,” she says, flashing me an angry stare with her dark blue eyes. “My mother is a great woman. Any man would be happy to have her.”

“Your mother could do much better than me.”

“Promise me one thing,” she says, almost at the point of tears. “Promise me you’ll go out on a date with her.”

“Okay, I promise.”

Suddenly, she gets tired.

“I have a secret,” she says with a downcast look. “I have a hole in my heart.”

“You mean you’re sad because you miss your daddy?”

She hesitates, looking like she’s fighting back tears. Finally, she says, “Yes.”

I give her a big hug.

“Tired,” she says. “Need a nap.” She grabs my hand and leads me into the bedroom. I tuck her in and give her another hug. In a minute, she’s asleep.

I doze waiting for Gina to come back. At 5 o’clock, Gina calls, saying she’ll be an hour late. When she gets home, I tell her that Charlie conked out at about three-thirty and is still asleep. “There isn’t anything wrong with her is there?” I ask.

“No,” she says, hesitating for a second. “You probably got her all tired out with your basketball playing. Little girls get tired, that’s all.”

I tell Gina that Charlie made me promise to go out on a date with her. She isn’t surprised.

“She’s always trying to get men to go out with me,” she says, with a steady gaze from her brown eyes. “She’s looking out for me.”

Gina asks if she can pay me next week because she’s short on cash. “Sure,” I say. “I don’t mind. It’s fun having a little sister.”

As I’m walking out the door, I recall something I wanted to ask her. “Remember how we talked about the Worldwide Wire Service. Well, I changed my mind. Maybe I could work there one day a week.”

“I’ll be glad to ask them,” she says. “I’ll let you know what they say.”

“So, are you keeping kosher, at least?”

These are the first words my mother says when I call her Sunday night.

“Of course I am, Ma,” I say. “I have two sets of dishes so I can be fully prepared to give dinner parties for my friends -- the mice. Why do you ask?”

“We you don’t go to the synagogue, so you should keep kosher,” she says.

“Ma, I stopped going to the synagogue since I was 14,” I say. “And as for keeping kosher, I only have a knife, a fork and a spoon. What should I keep kosher for?”

“You’re a Jew. Be a Jew.”

“I’ve heard that already.”

“So, how are you liking your apartment?” she asks.

“It’s wonderful. I close the door and I shut out the world. I have absolute privacy. It’s a feeling I’ve never had before,” I say. “Oh, I bought a TV set, a small one, 13 inches. I put it on the mantel piece. Now I have company if I get lonely.”

“You’d have company if you were living at Hersh’s,” she says. “And your food would be prepared. You wouldn’t have to go out and scrounge for it. You could devote yourself to your studies.”

“What do you think, ma, I take my club and my trusty musket and I go out on the trail and kill a deer or a wild turkey,” I say in an exasperated voice. “I don’t have to go far to get food. There are two restaurants on the corner.”

“And how are you enjoying your courses?” she says.

“Same as before,” I say. “I hate everything but English.”

“English? What can you do with English?”

“Teach high school, get my Ph.D. and teach in college.”

“Those aren’t ways to earn a proper living,” she says. “You have to have money to live in this world. Look at how hard it’s been for us.”

“I could become a journalist,” I say. “Hemingway was a journalist before he became a writer.”

“You think you’re Hemingway?” she sneers. “You’re not Hemingway and Jews don’t go into journalism.”

Oh yeah, what about Ben Hecht. He did well.

“Of course not,” I say. They only live the narrow, conventional life you’ve chosen for me. They become doctors. I’ve gotta go, Ma. I’ll call you next week.”

“Oh, one more thing,” she says. “That boy called. He asked for your number, again”

“By that boy you mean Simon,” I say.

“Yes,” she says. “Why do you have an unlisted number? Who has an unlisted number? Do you think you’re a celebrity?”

“It’s not an unlisted number,” she says. “It’s listed – but in somebody else’s name. The phone was here when I got here, so I’ve been using it. It saves money. When the phone company tells me to stop, I’ll get my own phone.”

“So what should I do about the number?” she asks.

“Absolutely don’t give him my number. Simon is the last person on earth I want to talk to.”

On Saturday, the day of Holly’s party, I get my usual two slices from Joe’s and then go to the Caffè Reggìo on MacDougal Street for a coffee. I often study at the Caffè Reggìo when the walls of my apartment start to close in on me. I sit down by the window at a marble table in the back. From the table, I can look out at the street and also admire the weird-looking cappuccino maker at the bar. The nickel- and bronze-colored machine, which

looks like a genie with many hands, has half a dozen spouts for espresso and it squeals with an ear-splitting eeeeeeee when a valve is opened to steam milk.

The café, with rough, terra cotta walls, a tan ceiling of tin squares and dark works of art that look like they were painted hundreds of years ago, is a little touristy. But the edges of the tables and chairs are worn, making it look old and cozy.

I am in a happy trance, sipping a cappuccino and munching a chocolate cannoli when I notice a figure come up to the window, peer in and walk away. A few moments later, the figure appears in front of me.

“Hello, Willie,” it says.

I stare at the figure, unable to recognize him. Finally, I make the connection.”

“Simon,” I say, surprised and angry.

“Simon. What the *fuck* are you doing here?”

“I have something important to tell you. May I sit down.”

“I’d rather you didn’t. You’re the last person in the world I want to talk to.”

“Please. It really is important.”

I look him in the eye for a full ten seconds. He does not move, so I say, “All right.”

The waitress comes over. I order another cappuccino. He orders tea.

He’s a little different from the Simon I knew. His hair, parted in the middle, is longer and somewhat flyaway. He looks a little paunchy, as if he’s gained 10 pounds. He appears distracted, as if he is somewhere else.

“How are things in Canada?” I say, using my best sarcasm. “Cold there, eh?”

“Not funny,” he says and sips his tea.

“How the hell did you find me?”

“Your mother gave me your address. I pressed your buzzer, but there was no answer. So I pressed all the other buzzers and a little girl answered. I said I was an old friend who was just in town for the weekend and she said you sometimes went to the Caffè Reggìo to study.

“MY ... MOTHER ... GAVE ... YOU ... MY ... ADDRESS,” I say, pronouncing each word loudly and deliberately.

“Yes. She wouldn’t give me your phone number, but after I told her about the engagement, she gave me your address.”

“What engagement?” I say, incredulous.

“Eliane and I are engaged.”

“You’re going to get *married*?” I ask, wide-eyed. “Aren’t you a little young for that? You have almost three years to go in college.

“We’ll get married eventually. This is the only way we can live together.”

“You’re living together? Wasn’t she going to marry Gerard?”

“She gave back his ring a year ago. She only said yes to get her parents off her back.”

“So she was seeing both of us and she chose you. I would have been nice if either of you had had the guts to tell me.”

“We took the easy way out.”

“You always take the easy way out,” I explode. “With me, with Jean-Louis. For someone who bills himself as a man’s man, you certainly don’t act like one.”

Simon starts to speak, but he’s interrupted by a loud rapping on the window. I turn and it’s Gina, giving me a big smile and waving with her right hand. I motion her inside.

“I was passing by and saw you sitting by the window, so I thought I’d say hello,” she says when she’s at our table. “Who’s this? Your boyfriend?” She giggles.

“Sure, we’re asshole buddies,” I say, standing up.

Simon stands up, his face red.

“This is Simon, my friend from Montreal,” I say.

“I’m Gina, this crazy man’s neighbor.” She shakes his hand, smiling. “Haven’t I met you? You look very familiar.”

Simon shakes his head.

“Would you like to have a coffee?” I ask.

“Can’t. I’m going to pick Charlie up from a play date. Which reminds me, I just got called in for an extra shift tomorrow. Could you possibly take care of Charlie again?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to a party tonight. I’ll be tired.”

“Pu-leese.” Mock downcast look.

“Okay. It’s a deal.”

“You’re a pal, Willie. Nice to meet you, Simon.” She rushes off.

“Who was that?” Simon asks once we sit down.

“She’s my neighbor. She lives on the floor above me. I babysit for her daughter, Charlie, the girl who told you where I was.”

“She’s pretty.”

“She’s married. You were starting to tell me something . . .”

“I’ve been very upset lately,” he says. “I feel guilty about the way I treated Jean-Louis. I feel guilty about the way I treated you. You were a good friend.” He looks like he is perspiring.

“Was Jean-Louis really angry at me.”

“Yes, he really was -- And hurt.”

He shrugs.

“It would have helped if you hadn’t ignored him,” I say, looking Simon in the eye. “It would have made it easier for him to accept himself.”

“How did he come to terms with it?” he says.

“He couldn’t come to terms with it,” I reply, my anger rising. “That’s why he killed himself. He couldn’t accept himself.”

“It was just so hard to know what to do,” he says. “I never had a boy try to kiss me before. I didn’t know how to show him kindness and still be a man.”

“Bullshit!” I snarl. “That’s the biggest load of crap I ever heard. You were just scared. You’re always scared. Being a man is doing something is doing something when you’re scared. It isn’t running around with a tomahawk shouting, “Kill all the fifis.”

A lot of eyes are on us. I start to get up to leave, but Simon grabs my arm. “Please don’t go yet,” he says.

He is silent for a moment, then looks up and me and says, “I am not responsible for Jean-Louis’ death.”

“You bear responsibility for Jean-Louis’ death,” I say, holding back my anger.

“He had you and that didn’t save him.”

“I couldn’t save him. His parents couldn’t save him. His therapist couldn’t save him.”

“No. I mean he didn’t need me anymore. He had your love.”

“What do you mean he had my love?”

“You’re a homosexual. That’s what the kids at school think.

I look at him sharply. “I’m not gay,” I say.

“That’s not what your parents told my father?”

“My parents told your father I’m gay?” I say incredulously.

“They said that’s why you dropped out of McGill.”

“That’s very hard to believe, Simon. My parents don’t talk to your father.”

“Well, they did this time and that’s what they said.”

“Regardless, Simon, I’m not gay.”

Simon looks down and again appears to be having a talk with himself. I hear the eeeeeeee of the cappuccino maker.

Finally, he says, “I think you’re kidding yourself. The word at school was you helped Jean-Louis because you’re a fag, too, and everybody thinks you came here to find a boyfriend.”

I feel the muscles in my jaw tighten. “I don’t give a shit what the kids back home think. They don’t matter a goddamn bit. Why couldn’t I find a boyfriend in Montreal?”

“In New York, your parents wouldn’t have to know,” he says. “Or they could pretend not to know. Lots of queers here, aren’t there? Isn’t Greenwich Village a nest of queers.”

“Watch your filthy mouth, okay!” I roar. “Watch your filthy mouth. I live here. I don’t want to get into a fight over something stupid you said.”

I get up, plant my hands on the table, lean forward and look Simon directly in the eye. “You want me to give you absolution for Jean-Louis’ death. I can’t do that. Only God or a priest can give you absolution. I’m neither.”

“One more thing,” he blurts out. “You told kids that I reacted to Jean-Louis the way I did because I’m gay and he awakened feelings in me I couldn’t accept.”

“Not true,” I say.

“That’s not what I heard.”

“I thought that at first. But now, I think you went skiing with Jean-Louis to experiment, but when he came onto you, you got scared and ran away. You wouldn’t go and talk to him because you thought people would think you’re gay.”

“That’s not true! That’s not true!” he insists.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve never told anybody. I don’t talk to the kids back home.”

“Good,” he says, “because if I ever hear that you said that, I’ll sue you.”

“You’ll sue me?” I say, glaring at his narrowed eyes. “Why don’t you just say you’ll come down and beat me up with a baseball bat. That would be a lot more realistic. You’ll sue me? You and the pater, with his pot belly and his whiskey breath. I can just see him rushing into Quebec Superior Court – his ball of a stomach bouncing – with the legal papers in his hands.”

I take a deep breath. “What have you got there in your jacket, Simon, a tape recorder? You’re ridiculous. Sure you’ll sue me. Just like you wrote Jean-Louis a letter instead of talking to him. If you hadn’t ignored him, he might still be alive today.”

With all eyes on me, I walk straight out the door. Simon tries to follow, but the waitress buttonholes him for the check, so I escape.

As soon as I get home, I call my parents. My mother answers.
“Why did you give Simon my address and why did you tell Simon’s father that I’m gay?” I demand.

“Us?” she protests. “We didn’t tell him that.”

“We I just saw Simon and he says you did.”

“He’s wrong. We don’t talk to Simon’s father.”

“Then who told him?”

“It was probably Solly.”

“Solly, who the hell is *Solly*?” I ask.

“You know him. He’s one of the Bubbee’s younger brothers. Uncle Yossie was trying to get a job with him. *He* knows Simon’s father.”

One big circular dysfunctional family.

“I don’t know him, mother. I never met him. He never came to the house.”

“Well, he and the Bubbee had a falling out. They didn’t speak for years,” she says. “But you met him. You just don’t remember.”

“What does it matter if I met him, I don’t know him,” I fume. “He has no right to any personal information about me.”

“Don’t get angry. We saw him over Rosh Hashanah and he asked what was going on with you, so we told him the whole nasty business with Jean-Louis. I think he came to the conclusion you were gay.”

“And you didn’t try to dissuade him?”

“What did you want us to tell him – that you suffered a nervous breakdown?”

“Mother,” I say, almost shouting, “you told someone I don’t know that I’m gay. Do you know how crazy that is? In this day and age, to call someone a homosexual is like calling him a communist. Now the whole city of Montreal believes I’m gay. The RCMP is probably searching pumpkin patches all over the Laurentians to find my letters to my boyfriend.”

“What? . . . Pumpkin patches? . . . I don’t understand.”

“Never mind,” I growl.

“If we told people you had a nervous breakdown, they’d think you were mentally ill,” she says. “Then nobody would want to marry you. People think mental illness is heredity. If you marry someone who has a mental illness, your children will have it.”

“Didn’t dad tell me this cockamamie bullshit when I went to see Jean-Louis’ psychiatrist?”

“It’s what people think in this day and age.”

“You told people I’m a homosexual so they wouldn’t think I was mentally ill. That’s so crazy. Why not just say nothing?”

“You *had* a nervous breakdown. We couldn’t just say nothing. Besides, homosexuality is just a phase. You grow out of it. Isn’t that what happens at the British public schools?”

Wow, I wonder who told her that?

“Don’t you think nervous breakdown is pushing it a bit?” I say. “I was depressed. A friend had killed himself. It was a lot to deal with. I needed time. I think if you told people that, they would understand. Anyway, I’m back in college now.”

“But in New York, not at McGill. There’s still a big question mark.”

“Oh I forgot, McGill is the seat of the gods.”

“You should have never gotten involved with that boy,” she says angrily. “It was none of your business. You should have concentrated on your schoolwork. A boy should know what he wants to do by the time he enters college. He should know that he’s going to have to work hard and then he’ll be set for life.”

“You’re angry I tried to help Jean-Louis. Is that why you gave Simon my address?”

“You said not to give him your phone number. You didn’t say anything about your address.”

“Don’t play games with me,” I say, furious. “You know I said he was the last person in the world I wanted to talk to.”

“After he told me about the engagement, I thought you would want to know,” she says. “I thought you would thank me.”

“It’s not a real engagement, mother. It’s just an excuse for them to live together.”

“Well, I didn’t know that,” she says. “I thought you’d want to know they were getting married. I thought that no matter what you said, you’d want to see him.”

“Do me a favor, mother, stop thinking for me.”

“I have to think for you,” she barks back. “You don’t know what to think, you’re just a boy.”

I slam down the receiver and take the phone off the hook.

A couple of hours later, I’m sitting on my bed when Gina knocks on the door. “I tried to call you but the line was busy,” she says.

“I took the phone off the hook,” I say. “I had a fight with my mother.”

“Anyway, who was that at the cafe? Was that your boyfriend?” she asks with a devilish grin.

“You asked me that before. No, he’s not my boyfriend. We were friends in Montreal,” I say. “Do you want to go out with him? He’s far too young for you. He’s my age.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” she says, flashing her eyes at me. “He’s cute.”

“Well, he’s got a girlfriend and he’s . . .” My voice trails off.

She touches my hand and looks me in the eye. “It’s not about going out with him. I was only asking because it seemed that the two of you were having a really intense conversation. And the two of you look a lot alike. You look like brothers.”

“Simon is the reason I’m here,” I say in a quiet voice.

She looks at me expectantly.

“It’s a long story. Do you feel like listening for a while?”

“If it’s going to take some time, we should go upstairs. Charlie is taking a nap and I don’t want her to wake up and find I’m not there.”

We go upstairs and she makes me espresso on her stovetop maker and we sit at her kitchen table – old waxed pine, not Formica – and drink it and eat homemade donuts and I think what an amazing person Gina is: she always has food and she always shares it. The cats mill about my feet, rubbing their heads against my ankles.

And like a broken record, I tell her about Simon and Ollie and how Jay Jay bullied me and how Jean-Louis came on to Simon who rejected him and he tried to commit suicide. And I befriended him and succeeded in making him feel better about himself but then Jay Jay bawled him out and Simon ignored him and that set him off. He committed suicide in his garage by turning on the ignition in his car. I watched the ambulance take him away.

As I say this, Gina is holding my hands, looking like she’s going to cry.

“You did a brave thing,” she says. “You should be proud of yourself.”

“You can’t feel proud of yourself in a situation like this,” I say, on the edge of tears. “For a long time, I blamed myself -- if only I had acted faster. But eventually, I accepted that he was gone and I had done the best I could and I wasn’t responsible for his death -- though sometimes I slip back.”

She puts her hands on my shoulders and gives me a gentle kiss on the lips.

“What’s that for?” I ask.

“A little treat,” she says with a smile. “Think of it as a cookie.”

Gina asks me why Simon came down to New York and I say he wants me to absolve him of responsibility for Jean-Louis’ death.

“I can’t grant him absolution,” I say. “I’m not a priest. His parents can help him. His girlfriend can help him. I can’t do it. It makes me furious to think that if had been just a little nicer, Jean-Louis might still be alive.”

I look at the kitchen clock and it’s almost seven. I tell Gina I have to go down to the apartment and change because I’m going to a party.

“A man on the town,” Gina says.

“Let me say goodbye to Charlie,” I say. “Where is she anyway?”

“She’s still napping. Let me wake her.”

“Still asleep? She conked out on me last week. Are you sure she’s okay?”

“She’s fine. Little girls take naps, that’s all.”

I take Gina’s hands and look her in the eye. “I told me my story, now you come clean with me. What’s really going on?”

“Nothing’s going on. I swear.”

I look at her sharply. “Come on, tell me the truth.”

She hesitates for a second, then says, “She’s anemic. It’s congenital. The doctors expect her to grow out of it. Her father had it when he was young.”

“And this is the real story”

“Yes,” she says angrily.

“I wish you’d told me,” I say. “I’ve let run around as much as she wants. That could have hurt her.”

“You’ve done just fine. It’s not good to make her feel self-conscious about it because she’s just going to outgrow it.”

Gina going to get Charlie and comes back with a sleepy child who looks very unhappy to have been woken up. She gives me a weak wave, says, “Goodbye, Daddy Willie,” and retreats back into her room.

As I’m walking out the door, Gina says, “Willie, wait. There’s something I want to tell you. Remember how I told Simon he looked familiar. Well, Charlie and I were out for a walk this morning and we saw Simon. He was holding hands with another man. At first, I thought it was you so we followed them for a minute and I realized it wasn’t. They crossed under the elevated West Side Highway and went to the Christopher Street piers, which since you don’t know the city is a gay pickup place. I didn’t know whether to tell you, but since you told me about Jean-Louis, I thought you should know.”

Though I’ve suspected this for some time, when it’s finally confirmed, I’m speechless.

I and a group of other kids are sitting in a circle in Holly’s apartment, passing around small pipe holding a small cube of a brown substance that looks like fudge -- or something else very different. I take a deep breath, suck it down into my lungs, hold it and then exhale. After a few of these breaths, the room begins to fade in and out. Sometimes I am there and sometimes I am not. A Joni Mitchell song is playing in the background:

I woke up today and found frost perched on the town,
It hovered in a frozen sky and swallowed summer down.

The sounds get louder and fall away. I am able to separate the different instruments.

Notes hang on longer than usual.

A girl with pale pink lips, black tights and a short black skirt reads from Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl”:

... purgatoried their torsos night after night
with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares,

alcohol and cock and endless balls . . .

“Cock and bull,” I shout with a silly smirk. I look around, but nobody is paying any attention to me.

The blonde sitting next to me, whom I have been trying to chat up, grimaces.

“What’s your name,” I ask the girl, who ignores me. Holly, seeing me flirt with the girl, comes over and stands between us.

“Hey, I know your name. It’s Yummyblonde,” I say. I take another hit of the smoke from the brown substance that looks like fudge.

“You’re Yummyblonde. Hello, Yummyblonde.”

The girl, who has gray eyes and a glorious figure, moves away.

“Hey, I know your name,” I say. “It’s Carol.”

“Oh, oh Carol, I am such a fool,” I croak.

Holly comes over and sits in the girl’s chair.

“You’re stoned,” she says.

“Stoned? What’s stoned? Yes, I am stoned,” I say. “This is good shit.”

I giggle.

Holly hugs me and gives me a big kiss to shut me up. I sit in my chair, smiling like a Buddha, totally inside my head, barely aware of what’s going on. When the time comes to leave, I can barely stand up.

“I gotta stay here,” I tell Holly. “I can’t move.”

“You can’t stay here. There’s no space,” she says.

“I can’t go home. I can’t walk,” I reply.

“All right, but you’ll have to sleep on the couch.

After the others leave, I begin repeating, “Shik-sa. You’re a shik-sa.”

“And you’re a stoned-out freak,” she says. “Smarten up.”

“Shik-sa . . .

I get up and walk to the desk, where there is a letter addressed to June Cartwright.

“Who is June Cartwright?” I ask.

Holly doesn’t answer, so I ask again.

“June is my first name,” she finally says. “Holly is my nickname.”

I realize I have never thought to ask what her real first name is.

“You’re name is June. That’s the name of Beaver Cleaver’s mother,” I tease. “You’re Beaver Cleaver’s mom.”

She hits me with a sofa cushion. I grab the cushion and hit her back.

“June Cleaver! June Cleaver!” I say. “Hey, do you know what Simone de Beauvoir’s nickname is? It’s the Beaver because she works all the time.

“Beaver Cleaver. Beaver Cleaver.”

“Shaddup Willie,” Holly says, hitting me with the cushion again.

We begin wrestling. I kiss her passionately on the mouth and start unbuttoning her blouse. I reach behind to unhook her bra, but can’t seem to do it.

“Willie, are you a virgin?” she asks with something of a frown.

“Me . . . , no, I’m not a virgin,” I insist.

She unhooks her bra and finishes taking her clothes. She guides me inside her and in a few moments, I explode with passion.

After a moment, she says, “Aren’t you glad you got that over with?” giving me a sly smile.

I kiss her nipples and slowly work my tongue down to her warm triangle, the way I’ve read about in novels. She begins to moan and I mount her again. She makes little gasps and then sighs and sighs. We fall asleep holding each other.

When we wake up, I ask, “Is it time for our cigarette? That’s the way they do it in the movies.”

“I don’t smoke – cigarettes, that is,” she says. She bites me on the ear.

We go back to sleep. When we wake up later, I hold her hands and look at her green-gold eyes. I give her a tender kiss, barely touching her lips.

The next morning, Holly and I are having breakfast at the white café when who should walk in but Simon, who is with another man. Holly is wearing a large, floppy hat so I scrunch down, hoping the hat will hide while I spy on them. Simon is sitting with his back to me, so that makes it easier.

“Is that the guy?” Holly asks.

“That’s him,” I say.

Holly says the other man is Peter Archer, an aide to a local congressman. He used to come in to a bar she worked at.

They are talking animatedly, but I can’t hear what they’re saying. Holly says it looks like they’re flirting with each other. I glance over and see Peter rub the top of Simon’s hand with his palm. Gina was right.

Suddenly, it becomes clear that Simon didn't come to New York just to get my absolution. He also came to see Peter and visiting me was a perfect alibi. A wave of anger rolls through me.

When we finish breakfast, I tell Holly that I'll buy her the best dinner in the world if she goes over to them and pretends to be a British hooker. She immediately rises to the task, goes over to their table and puts on her best Eliza Doolittle accent.

"Hullo you handsome gentlemen," she says. "Interested in a party?"

No answer.

"We could have a nice half-and-half party for \$50 each. Or I could take on the both of you, one in front and one in back. I rather like that."

"Take a hike, honey," Peter says. "We're not interested."

"No need to be rude, darling. I'm simply the best there is. I can take you to paradise."

"Look, we play for a different team. Beat it or I'll call the manager." He looks around. "Is there a manager here?"

I rush up.

"What seems to be the matter?" I say. Then, pretending I've just recognized them, I say, "Simon, so good to see you – and this must be Peter.

Simon reddens.

"What's going on here, Simon," Peter says angrily. "Who is this guy? You know I have to be careful. I can't embarrass the congressman. He thinks I'm getting married."

"Come darling," I tell Holly. "It's clear we're not wanted. "Toodle-oo you sexy boys."

As we're going out the door, Holly snarls, "Fuckers can't get it up."

Outside, we collapse into each other's arms, laughing hysterically.

“You were wonderful,” I say.

“You weren’t bad, yourself.”

Simon storms out, snorting like a bull. “That was some performance,” he says.

“I thought we’d get a kick out it.” I smile.

“If you ever tell –

“I know, you sue me.”

“I’ll bash your face in,” he says, raising his fists and glaring at me.”

“Not likely, old darling. You lay one finger on me and I’ll call the cops. And that could prove very embarrassing for the congressman.”

We turn around and start walking away, but I remember there was something I wanted to say and turn around. “Simon, this is Holly. Be sure to give her regards to Solly.”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” says Holly and we walk on.

“Who the fuck is Solly?” she asks, once we out of earshot.

“Some distant relative. It’s too ridiculous to explain. I’ll tell you another time.”

I’m glad I made him mad, the little shit, I think as we walk along the shaded streets. If he’s interested in men, what’s he doing with Eliane? Is he living with her so he can prove to others -- the pater, the mater -- that he’s not gay? Or is he doing it so he can prove it to himself? I’m enraged to think that one person’s life was destroyed because another didn’t have the courage to admit what he is. I’m so angry I want to hit something.

I get into the rhythm of being a New Yorker. I buy the Village Voice on Thursday and the Sunday New York Times on Saturday night at the Sheridan Square newsstand. I

listens to Allison Steele the Nightbird on WNEW-FM. *“The flutter of wings, the shadow across the moon, the sounds of the night, as the Nightbird spreads her wings and soars above the earth.”*

On the days I have classes, I lie makes it a point of walking along the north side of Washington Square Park so I can peak through the marble arch and see the campanile of the Italianate Judson Memorial Church on the south side. Sometimes, I imagine I am in a little Italian village and see the campanile off in the distance. Sometimes, I just like looking at a straight line enclosed by a circle. I don't know why, but I find it very satisfying to see the combination of circle and straight line. After looking at the campanile, I walk through the arch, turn left and walk through the park to the fortress-like NYU building where classes are held.

I often have lunch at the Chock Full of Nuts on Eighth Street and University Place, where for 25 cents you can have a cream cheese sandwich on date-nut bread. A dime buys a cup of coffee. *Chock Full of Nuts the heavenly coffee, the coffee not even a millionaire's money can buy*, or so goes the commercial. In the evenings, I and Holly sometimes go to the Cedar Tavern, sitting in one of the red booths on the left and ordering a pitcher of beer. In the 50s, the Cedar had been the hangout of Abstract Impressionist artists like Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollack and also Jack Kerouac and other Beat poets. Pollack and Kerouac had been banned from the bar, Pollack for breaking down the door of the men's room and Kerouac for pissing in an ash tray. And de Kooning was no longer drinking so he didn't come to the tavern. But Ginsberg comes. I see him holding court by the bar one night and want to go talk to him, but I don't have the nerve. Holly knows everyone and a steady stream of people stop by our booth.

I and Holly also go to the Bleecker Street Cinema -- at Bleecker and Thompson, across from the Bitter End -- where we see foreign films.

My hunger to observe things, which began when I wandered the streets of the old neighborhood in Montreal, just keeps growing. Everything is new. Everything triggers a sense of wonder. I am in the moment.

I love to put my eye through a hole in the chain-link fence at the basketball courts at West Third and Sixth Avenue, watching the players on the pick-up teams whoosh past me and listening to them whoop when they slam the ball through the net. I imagine my eye is a camera taking pictures of it all.

I pick an old copy of “Dangling Man,” Saul Bellow’s debut novel, from a table of used books on Sixth Ave and learn a new word – avidity. Bellow’s protagonist, Joseph, uses the word to describe his desire to experience and record everything. *That’s so wonderful, I tell myself, a great writer has the same feelings I have. Maybe all writers have these feelings.* Joseph goes on to say that “the real world is the world of art and thought. There is only one worthwhile sort of work, that of the imagination.” Those are lofty thoughts and I’m not sure I’m there yet. I’m not sure I’m that deep, but it’s certainly something to think about.

There are street musicians everywhere.

A woman who is barely five feet tall and has long auburn hair sometimes sings near the fountain in Washington Square, accompanying herself on a 12-string guitar. She sings one song I love, “Pretty Saro:”

“Down in some lone valley,
In a lonesome place,
Where the wild birds do whistle
and their notes do increase.”

One day, on an impulse, I pull out \$5 and place in it her collection hat.

“I love that song. I’d really like it if you wrote out the words,” I say.

“I love that song, too,” she says. “I sang it in a contest and I won. I got enough money to come to New York.”

“Wow,” I say.

“You don’t have to pay me,” the woman says. “I’ll write out the words and give them to you the next time I see you.”

“Thanks a lot,” I say, suddenly getting tongue-tied.

I leave the money in her hat.

I and Holly and some friends go to the open mike night at Gerde’s Folk City on West Fourth. A skinny kid with wild hair is on stage, holding his guitar like a machine gun and strumming it bang, bang, rat-tat-tat fashion. He mumbles so badly I can’t make out most of what he is saying. But I do manage to understand two lines:

Jewels and binoculars
hang from the head of a mule

I like that,” I tell myself. “It’s a powerful image

Also on the bill is a trio consisting of two bearded men who play guitar and a blonde. I don’t catch their name so I call them two beards and a blonde. The woman is striking and her hair catches the light as she flicks her head in time with the music during a gospel song:

Jesus met the woman at the well,
And he told her everything she’d ever done.

I take care of Charlie at least once a week. She is like a little cat. She meows at me. I scratch her behind the ears and meow back. One evening, we are sitting at the kitchen table, when the two cats jump up and look at me. I could swear they are blinking at me.

“I think the cats are blinking at me,” I tell Charlie. “Could that be possible?”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, Willie,” Charlie says. “That means they love you. When cats blink at you, they love you. Blinking is their way of giving you a hug. Blink back at them. When cats blink at you, you have to blink back at them.”

Gina is not impressed when I tell her this.

“I’ve never heard that before,” she says. “Maybe the cats are blinking because they’re going to sleep. Cats blink before they go to sleep. You’re a sucker for what Charlie says. She’s got you wrapped around her little finger.”

When we go out to play, I usually take Charlie to Winston Churchill Park, about a block from Joe’s pizzeria, where she plays on the swings and slides. She runs around a lot and then, the anemia kicks in and she gets very tired. Sometimes, I have to carry her home. I guess I shouldn’t let her play so hard.

Since Gina doesn’t have much money, she often pays me by making me dinner – which is okay because she’s a superb cook.

I have a new family -- a faux little sister and a faux big sister – as well as a girlfriend. Holly sees other guys, but frankly, I don’t give a damn. The last thing I want is to be tied down.

The next week, Charlie has a cold so she sits at the kitchen table and paints. She likes to paint washes using light pastel colors, blues and greens mostly. This one is a wash in grey with a darker grey shape in the middle. It looks like the painting of an animal you might see in an ancient cave. A head, two front feet, two back feet, all in one dimension.

“That’s Wilhelmina,” Charlie says when she sees me looking at the dark, grey shape.

“Who’s Wilhelmina?” I ask.

“She’s the mother cat,” Charlie says, as if everybody knew what she was talking about.

“Mother to whom?”

“She’s the mother to my two cats. They’re just babies. They’re too young to know what to do by themselves. They need someone to tell them what to do.”

“So she gives them orders?”

“Yes, and she follows me wherever I go,” she says as if she’s telling me a story.

“She really follows you wherever you go?”

“Yes. She walks at my side. Sometimes she’s on my left and sometimes she’s on my right. Can’t you see her? I was sure everybody could see her.”

I tell her this reminds me of my favorite short story, “Tracy’s Tiger,” by William Saroyan, in which a coffee taster named Thomas Tracy imagines he has a black panther walking at his side like a large dog.

“Saroyan says the tiger symbolizes love, but I think it symbolizes the life force,” I tell her. “We all have a life force inside us, but for most of us, it’s buried and we don’t know it exists.”

Charlie looks confused, then bored.

“I wish I could go out and get some French fries from White Castle,” she says.

“Can you see Wilhelmina? Can you, can you Willie?” Charlie asks.

“Not so far, but I really haven’t been looking,” I say. “I’ll try harder.”

Gina is not impressed by Wilhelmina. “It’s just a little girl telling you a story. She knows she has a willing audience.”

“I’m not sure,” I say. “Charlie is special. Maybe she can see something we can’t.”

A week later, Charlie is feeling better and so off we go to White Castle. As we are walking down Sixth Avenue, we see a boy of about Charlie’s age screaming as

he is being dragged by an older man.

“Let me go! Let me go!” the boy yells.

Charlie gets very upset and starts crying. “Help him, help him,” she cries. “He’s frightened.” She lifts up her arms and I pick her up and hold her.

Suddenly, without warning, a large grey cat runs over and jumps on the man, hissing and clawing at his face, drawing blood.

“That Wilhelmina,” Charlie whispers to me.

The man lets go of the little boy so he can rid himself of the cat, which has gotten its claws into his shoulders. He grabs the cat with both hands and tries to pull it off, but the animal scratches at his face and shoulders with its forepaws.

It inflicts a nasty scratch on his forehead.

“Christ,” he shouts. “God damn it.”

I and Charlie rush over to try to comfort the little boy and when we’re a few steps away, the cat jumps down and runs past us.

Charlie touches the boy’s face, trying to wipe off his tears.

“He’s very frightened,” she tells me.

“Don’t worry,” she tells the boy. “You’ll be all right.”

“Are you okay?” I ask him.

“I didn’t want to go with him,” the boy says.

I ask him his name and he mumbles something, maybe Joe.

“Do you know the man?” I ask.

He looks down and says nothing.

The man, meanwhile, is trying to wipe the blood off his face with a handkerchief and at the same time, screaming, “Does anybody where that cat came from? Does anybody know who owns that cat. If I find out who owns that cat, I’ll sue.”

As the man continues screaming and cursing, a cop and a woman with a bowl of frizzy, gray hair arrive.

“Joe, are you all right? Are you all right?” she asks, running up to the little boy. She gives him, pats his face and looks like she is going to burst into tears.

“That bastard tried to steal him,” she says, pointing to the man.

“I wasn’t stealing him,” the man snarls. “I’m his father. This miserable bitch is my ex- and she won’t let me see him. He’s supposed to be able to spend time with me.”

“How can I let you see him when you’re such a wild animal,” the woman complains.

They go at each other and I deliver little Joe to the cop, whispering to Charlie not to say anything about Wilhelmina. “They won’t understand,” I say.

“What’s your interest in this,” the cop asks me.

I explain that I’m Charlie’s babysitter and we were going to get French fries when we saw the little boy being dragged down the street screaming. Suddenly, a cat appeared out of nowhere and jumped on the man.

At that point, injecting a bit of comic relief into the situation, another grey-haired woman, this one wearing a blue, cardigan and a print dress, rushes up and announces, “I saw the cat. I saw the cat. The cat disappeared into the little girl.”

I, Charlie and the cop stare at her fiercely.

Finally, the cop says, “You saw the cat disappear into the little girl?”

“Yes I did! Yes I did!” the woman says breathlessly. “I know it sounds unbelievable, but that’s what I saw. The cat ran up to the little girl and disappeared inside her.”

Nobody speaks for a moment, then I say, “That’s quite a trick. I don’t think Charlie is that good a magician.”

I hold open her jacket. “I don’t think you’ll find any cat here,” I say. “Or here,” I add, opening my jacket.

The cop writes down our names and as we are leaving, the man comes over, wags his finger in my face and yells, “If I find out you own that cat, I’ll sue you. You can count on that. You’re not going to get away with this.”

We walk away without saying anything. When we’re far enough away, we smile and nod our heads.

One Thursday, without any warning, the Worldwide Wire Service (WWW) calls and asks if I’d like to start working there on Sunday. I say yes and they instruct me to show up at 10 a.m. and ask for Lou on the general desk. Shortly before 10 a.m. on Sunday, I walk into the Daily News building on East 42nd Street – which has a huge globe in the lobby – and take an elevator to the 10th floor. The first thing I notice about the wire service is six large TV sets on a square platform suspended above the general desk, the main editing desk. Fanning out across the ceiling from the general desk are vacuum tubes that carry stories and messages to and from the other desks. It gives the office the look of an old-time department store.

Lou shakes my hand and tells me I’ll be working on the local desk, which covers the city and the suburbs. Lou is tall and thin, wears wire-rimmed glasses and has a small nose and a moustache that falls over his upper lip, giving his face the look of a walrus. Gina told me he has a wry, sardonic manner that makes people laugh, but he can also be icy and distant. She also said

that even though he disdains the title, Lou is the managing editor of WWW and the brains of the outfit. He is regarded as one of founders of the Beats, having introduced Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac when all three were at Columbia. He once rolled Kerouac home in a barrel. There is a rumor that Lou spent time behind bars for stabbing a man to death in Riverside Park, but nobody knows if it is really true.

Lou is in the middle of explaining to me that a wire service provides coverage for newspapers that can't afford their own correspondents when a plump woman with short, brown hair comes rushing up to the general desk

“Lou! Lou! There's a mouse in the features department,” she says breathlessly.

“A mouse in the features department?” Lou says, rolling his eyes. “Well, what did the mouse have to say? Did you get any quotes?”

“There's a mouse, Lou,” she says, glaring at him.

“No quotes, huh?” Lou says, without changing his expression an iota. “Well, go back and get quotes from the mouse.”

“That's not funny, Lou,” the woman fumes, as the other editors on the desk roar.

The woman storms off.

Lou introduces Willie to Barton Puttybone, who runs the local desk on Sunday. Puttybone is truly an amazing figure. His nose is the shape of a pickle and glasses with Coke-bottle lenses are perched on the tip of it. He is only five feet tall, but is just as wide all around, so his girth precedes him wherever he goes. He has knocked over lamps and vases on desks -- and even a small copy boy, Gina told me. Once, he knocked over the vase on the desk of Miss Stagworthy, she filled the vase with water and threw it in Puttybone's face. Puttybone takes small, quick steps so his feet look like the propeller of a motorboat.

Puttybone fancies himself as a poet and has even written a book of poetry, “Song for a Seagull,” which he leaves out on his desk whenever he works. This has prompted the nickname, “Seagull,” which Puttybone detests.

Puttybone tells me my tasks are to watch the vacuum tubes, to change the rolls of paper on the printers in the teletype room, to answer the phone when he is busy -- and to get lunch. If I work out, Puttybone says, I may be given radio copy to write or even – and to be sure, he emphasizes, this happens in the rarest of occasions – be sent out on a story.

There is only one local desk reporter in the office right now, Starfucker, an office legend, according to Gina. Starfucker can write a 20-paragraph story in 20 minutes and he has great sources. In winter, spring and fall, he always wears a camel-colored mohair coat over a black shirt and black pants. In summer, he wears a camel-colored suit jacket over a black shirt and black pants. He got his nickname because he often drops into the office after deadline with an actress or starlet on his arm. His pretext is that he needs to check his messages or make a few calls to see if his story needs updating. His real reason is to show off his latest conquest. To let it be known that he, Starfucker, is about to fuck a star, many stars, and you’re not. Starfucker pointedly ignores me.

There isn’t that much work to do, so time hangs heavy on my hands. I try to decipher my psychology textbook and also observe the office from my special perch. On the far side of the room, a tall, very thin man – his belt looks like he’s punched extra holes in it – is walking slowly, bent over at the waist as if he was carrying a 100-pound sack on his back. Lou is cracking jokes.

“Stupid? You can’t spell stupid without UPI,” he says.

“Crap? You can’t spell crap without AP.”

His desk mates explode with laughter.

Puttybone steps away for a moment, then comes back muttering “the pittering, pattering, puttering puce ...”

“Just composing a poem in my head,” he says when he catches me looking at him.

I am sent out to get lunch, which goes well except that Miller, a Scot who works on the general desk, suspiciously counts every penny I give him.

After I finish lunch, Puttybone sends me down the hall to check on the progress of a feature by Mississippi Molly that is on the local desk’s afternoon budget. I find my way to features and explain my mission to the editor, a heavysset man with a broad face, black hair and a friendly manner. “Welcome to our house of horrors,” says the editor, extending his hand. “I’m Renzulli.”

Renzulli has rolled up the story and placed it in the glass cylinder that goes inside the vacuum tube. He is about to place the cylinder in the tube when his assistant interrupts him.

“It’s Seagull,” the assistant says. “He wants to know who’s in charge.”

Renzulli picks up his phone.

“Who’s in charge of what, Bart?” he says.

Puttybone asks if I got there to check about Mississippi Molly’s story.

“He did and it’s coming right up,” Renzulli says. “In fact, if you put your face under the vacuum tube, it’ll hit you in the head.” He bangs the phone down and slams the glass cylinder into the vacuum tube.

“As I said,” he tells me. “Welcome to our house of horrors.”

Just then, Mississippi Molly walks by. She is six feet tall and stunning. She has a great ass. I know it's wrong to think of women as being a collection of parts, but Molly really has a terrific ass, perfect in every way.

"Was my story all right?" she asks Renzulli.

"Didn't change a word," he says.

Molly introduces herself to me as "just a little ole Southern gal from Tennessee." I decide it's best not to ask why her nickname is Mississippi Mollie if she comes from Tennessee.

When I return to the local desk, more people have come in and are writing their stories. There is an exquisite blonde called Ellan who is talking to Starfucker. She is so pretty that I consider ignoring my usual shyness and going over to talk to her. But best not to do it on my first day. Mississippi Molly passes by and gives me a big smile. She stops to talk to Lou, bending at the waist. I move my chair to get a better view. I know I shouldn't be doing this, but if Molly wanted to look at my ass, I wouldn't care one pit. I am imagining just what I might do with that ass when my reverie is interrupted by "GOLDSTEIN!"

"Are you aware you left an URGENT unnoticed for five minutes?" Puttybone thunders. "This is unforgiveable."

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"Didn't you hear the bells going off in the teletype room? That means an urgent story has come in. I specifically remember telling you to listen for the bonging of the bells. An urgent came in from Washington and we have to get a reaction from the mayor. And we're late. And it's your fault. AP and UPI probably have it already."

I struggle for something to say. I guess I missed the bonging of the bells because I was thinking about Mollie. Or maybe it's just very loud in the newsroom. I would like to tell Seagull that someday I'm going to bong bells on his head, but I don't.

"Seagull!" Lou shouts, "Get over here!"

Puttybone colors deeply and walks over to the general desk.

Lou takes him aside and says in a voice loud enough for me to hear, "Listen Seagull, don't bully the help. We have enough trouble getting good people without you scaring them off on their first day."

"Puttybone, if you please," says Seagull, "and I wasn't bullying him. I was just telling him something they must have told him in his first day in journalism school."

"Okay Bart, I'll call you Puttybone," Lou replies. "First, he doesn't go to journalism school, he's pre-med. And second, don't bully him if you value your job."

He makes a shooping motion with his hand and Seagull leaves, his face almost purple.

Following in the footsteps of Holly Golightly, Holly gets a tiger-striped kitten from an animal shelter. Instead of not naming her, as the fictional Holly did, Holly names her Gigi. The kitten races around the apartment on unsteady paws and sleeps on Holly's back at night.

Holly lives in a studio apartment in the attic of a four-story white townhouse on Gay Street, a small and winding street near Sheridan Square. I often get lost trying to find it. My best guide is the motor scooter she parks outside. The building appears to lean backwards. The stairs creak and groan. The room is about 20 feet by 20 feet. It has a musty, friendly smell. There are two large windows in front, so the room is always bright, and a deck in back that is as large as the apartment itself. Holly has a table, an umbrella and worn chairs on the deck. There are pots

containing geraniums and impatiens in colors of red, orange and white and sprays of willow branches. When it is warm, Holly often drags her mattress out to the deck and sleeps outside.

The townhouse has a mansard roof and so Holly's apartment has a flat ceiling with two sloping sides. I have to remember to get up slowly when I get out of bed. The apartment is divided in two, with the bed on the right side and a soft chair and a standing lamp by the back window. The left side has small kitchen. In front of it is a round table, where Holly eats and works. Two large bookcases placed back to back divide the room in two. The apartment is exactly what I imagine a garret in Paris looks like.

I often study in the apartment, lying on the bed and trying to make sense of introduction to psychology. I have to force myself to concentrate. Holly, on the other hand, throws herself into whatever she does, which often is doing watercolors for art class. She tucks her long blonde hair behind her ears and stares intently at the drawing paper, dipping her brush into color and then water and slipping it quickly across the page. I watch her as she appears lost in her world, working with the intensity of a child at play.

The psychology teacher, Prof. Vindra, is a behaviorist – he hates Freud and believes that only observable behavior should be the subject of psychology. He is very fond of the words behavior and motivation, which he pronounces weHAYwior and motiWAtion, which never fails to make me giggle even though I know I shouldn't.

“What are you giggling about?” Holly asks. “It's interrupting my work.”

“WeHAWior and motiWAtion,” I say.

“What?”

“That's the way the psychology prof pronounces behavior and motivation.”

“Where's her from?”

“India or Pakistan.”

“It’s not nice to make fun Indians and Pakistanis,” she says.

“I know, but the guy’s just so full of himself,” I say. “And he wears shirts that are at least a size too small. He’s a big stocky fella, so it gives new meaning to the expression stuffed shirt.”

“You should have checked him out before you took the course.”

“I have to take it. I’m thinking of becoming a clinical psychologist and it’s the prerequisite to everything else.”

“Still thinking about that life plan, eh?”

“You gotta eat. It seems like a good compromise between the creative and the practical.”

“Do you like the course?”

“No, it’s about rats, not people.”

“Josh wants to be a psychologist, but he’s more interest in research than a steady meal ticket.”

“Who’s Josh? – oh, your old boyfriend.”

“My first Jew. Jews make the best husbands.”

“You said that already.”

I buy the sheet music to “Moon River,” the song in “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” and bring it over to Holly’s with my tinny guitar. I play a simple arpeggio on the guitar and start singing, “Moon river wider than a mile.” Holly tries to harmonize with me but can’t do it and begins singing off key.

She breaks out in a wild laugh, banging me on the shoulder.

“You’re crazy,” I say.

“I love ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s,’” Holly says. “I’m going to find a rich man like Rusty Trawler and run off with him and live happily ever after.”

“Holly didn’t run off with Rusty Trawler,” Willie objects. “Her friend Mag Wildwood did. Holly was going to run off with a Brazilian diplomat, but he dumped her when she was arrested for being a courier for Sally Tomato, the Mafia guy.”

“Tomato, schmato,” Holly roars. “I’m going to find a handsome, rich guy like Rusty Trawler to roam the world with. And I’m going to have fun!”

“And what about me. Am I chopped liver,” I ask.

“I’m only kidding,” she says.

And I’m certain that if she finds a Rusty Trawler, she will go off with him at a moment’s notice and not because she doesn’t love me. It will be because she throws herself into everything she does, usually without thinking of the consequences. It’s the way she learns about life. If it doesn’t work, she can back out, change her mind. She isn’t looking for a life plan. She does the things she wants when she wants them.

One Saturday afternoon, Holly and I are sitting around looking for something to do when I suggest they go to the top of the Empire State building.

“Haven’t you been there yet?” Holly asks.

“No. Not since I was a kid,” I reply.

“Okay, let’s go.”

It is early December, a week after Thanksgiving, and the Christmas lights are beginning to come on. The streets are filled with people and cars. There is color and noise.

Holly is wearing a red beret rakishly tilted to one side, a black coat and black boots. She looks wonderful

When we step out on the 86th floor observation deck, I am amazed at what I see. On my left is one river. On my right is another. Ahead are the spires of tall buildings, like trees in a forest dozens of stories high. As I look down at the cars going down Fifth Avenue, I close my eyes and see lines of red, white and yellow weaving down the street.

I think of a Joni Mitchell song:

And people twenty stories down
Look like colored currents in the street.

I look at the buildings and see tiny panes of light, some white, some yellow, some brown. *What goes on in there? I think. Are they happy? Are they making love? Are they getting ready to go to work? To go out? Have they been defeated by life? Have they succeeded?* I remember a painting Edward Hopper in which all the viewer sees is a glimpse of a woman in a print dress bending over framed by an open window.

My thoughts are interrupted by Holly, who is thoroughly bored. She puts her hands on her hips, leans into me and says, “Know what let’s do. Let’s go eat in Chinatown and then walk across the Brooklyn Bridge.”

“Why do you want to do that?”

“That’s what Holly Golightly and Fred did in ‘Breakfast at Tiffany’s.’”

“So you want to do it?”

“Yes. It will be fun.”

“Am I Fred?”

“Yes, you’ll be Fred. Come on Fred.”

We get off the subway at West Fourth and amble across Bleecker Street, where I stare at the coffee houses and the Bitter End, where I saw Bill Cosby. Then we turn right and go down

Lafayette Street. I stare at a columned building with high windows. Holly tells me it's the Puck Building because the front has two gold figures of Shakespeare's character, Puck.

Every couple of blocks or so, we kiss.

Finally, we arrive in Chinatown and pick a place on East Broadway called the Rice Shoppe. We order clams in black bean sauce and mu shu pork. This is a real treat for me because I haven't been to many Chinese restaurants. The Chinatown in Montreal is only two blocks long and there aren't Chinese restaurants everywhere like there are in New York. The clams with black bean sauce are delicious, the sauce heightening the flavor of the clams, and I order another plate of them.

"So what do Holly and Fred do in the restaurant?" I ask as I fork another delicious morsel into my mouth.

"I don't know," Holly says. "The section is only one sentence long."

"Oh," Willie says.

Holly begins imitating Holly's habit of using French phrases.

"Fred, mon petit, could you get me some soy sauce. There doesn't seem to be any on the table. Quelle horreur!"

"Je vais chercher," Willie replies.

"Je vais – what?" Holly says.

"Chercher -- I'm going to look for it," Willie says.

"Vite! Vite! Mon ami. Je mours de faim."

"La plume de ma vache is sur le pupitre de mon cheval," I reply.

"What does that mean?"

"My cow's pen is on my horse's desk."

“Ha-a-a-a.” Holly lets out a loud laugh and doubles over. “You’re funny, Fred! That’s very funny!”

“Tu est tres gentille.”

Holly leads the way to the Brooklyn Bridge. I cast sidelong glances at her, admiring the way she purposefully strides in her long black boots and black coat. Suddenly she bends down to pet a beagle, brown and white with floppy ears.

“Oh, look at him, look at him!” she cries.

As we start walking across the bridge, I grab Holly, put my hand under her coat, grab her ass and give her a long kiss. As we are walking, I start to feel warm currents coursing through my veins and colors and images swirling through my head. I look behind me and the bridge cables, arranged as triangles, start to shimmer before my eyes. To my left, the sun is a ball of flame surrounded by a smudge of rose. There is a white ghost of a moon above me. The wind catches Holly’s hair and blows it into a yellow cloud. The sun hurls a bolt of red at the cloud and for a moment, Holly looks like she is on fire.

The next afternoon, the downstairs buzzer sounds. I press the button and open the front door and see Holly trudging up the stairs. She is stylishly dressed in her red beret, black motorcycle jacket and black jeans, but she looks like she has been crying.

“I have the mean reds,” she says after we say hello, “and I have to be taken to Tiffany’s.”

I invite her in and put on the kettle for tea.

“What happened,” I say.

“I had coffee with Josh and he told me he has a new girlfriend,” she says.

“You didn’t expect him to stay single, did you?”

“No, I guess not. But now that he has a girlfriend, it means that it’s all over with us and we’ll never be together again. It’s hard to face reality.” Tears begin to well in her eyes. “We were together for two years.”

I hand her a cup of tea. “Did you call him or did he call you?” I ask.

“I called him.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to see if there was anything left.”

“You shouldn’t do that. You’re just setting yourself up to get hurt.”

She begins to sob and I take her in my arms and hold her.

“Let’s go to Tiffany’s,” I say.

Holly wipes her eyes and we are just about to leave when there is a knock on the door.

It’s Gina.

I introduce the women to each other and it could be my imagination, but I think I see them stiffen imperceptibly.

“I have a big favor to ask,” Gina says. “Jack stayed over and we want to go out to get a bite to eat. We’ll only be gone an hour. Could you take care of Charlie?” She says this matter-of-factly, as if I knew that Jack slept over regularly.

“I wish I could,” I say, “but I promised Holly I’d take her to Tiffany’s. She’s feeling a little sad right now and she likes to go to Tiffany’s whenever she feels sad, just like Holly Golightly.”

“Please,” Gina says, opening her eyes as wide as they can go. “It’ll only be for an hour.”

“I’ll make you a big plate of brownies,” she adds, smiling at Holly as if they both shared in the secret that I love brownies.

“I’m sorry. I’d love to help,” I start to say, but Holly interrupts me.

“We’ll do it,” she says. “I’ll be all right. I’ll live.”

Gina leads us upstairs and introduces us to Jack, who could be a dead ringer for Kirk Douglas. He has dark grey hair slicked back, a piercing gaze and a hole in his chin. He squeezes my hand hard, as if we were taking part in a handshaking contest.

Charlie, meanwhile, is sitting at the kitchen table, listlessly eating a sandwich. We sit down at the table and she glares daggers at Holly, who seems wrapped up in her own thoughts. The cats rub their backs against Holly’s ankles, but even though she loves cats, she takes no notice.

There’s some coffee left in the little silver coffee pot and I ask Holly if she wants some. She says no and I pour it for myself. Charlie eats a few more bites of her sandwich, puts it down and commands me to put her to bed.

“You broke your promise,” she fumes once I’ve tucked her in.

“What promise ?” I say.

“To go out on a date with mommy,” she says.

“But I’m too young for your mother,” I say, “not to mention the fact I’m seeing Holly. Besides, what about Jack? He seems like a much better bet than me.”

“Jack doesn’t know how to put a little girl to bed. And he smells,” she says, her nostrils flaring. And lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, she adds, “We think he may be married.”

If Gina thinks Jack is married, why is she sleeping with him? I wonder, but who am I to make rules for people. Charlie, meanwhile, continues harping on the date.

“You promised! You promised!” she whines.

“All right, I’ll ask her,” I say. “I don’t think she’ll be at all interested, but I’ll ask her.”

“That’s my little sister – pretend sister,” I tell Holly when I sit back down at the kitchen table. “It’s nice to have a sister. I’ve never had one before. It’s nice to be able to care for someone.”

“It’s really funny -- the longest relationship I’ve had with a woman is with a 6-year-old girl,” I go on.

“What about me?”

“I met her the day before I met you.”

“She has anemia,” I add. “She gets tired very quickly when I take her out to play.”

“What does her mother say?”

“She says she’ll grow out of it.”

Holly shrugs.

“She wants me to go out on a date with her mother,” I go on. “When I mentioned that to Gina, she didn’t seem interested at all.”

“Maybe she’s playing hard to get.”

“Maybe she’s not interested.”

“You’re a good-looking guy. You just don’t realize you’re attractive to women.”

Gina takes too long getting back. Holly says she’s tired and wants to go home. I tell her to go downstairs and take a nap and I’ll join her as soon as Gina arrives.

Gina shows up half an hour later, apologizing profusely.

“Holly’s very pretty,” she says. “You’re a lucky man.”

“She’s very unusual,” I say. “She pretends to be other people. This week, she’s Holly Golightly. Next week, she could be someone else. She’s very exciting to be with. You never know what she’s going to do from moment to moment.”

“What’s she upset about?” Gina asks.

“She saw her old boyfriend and he told he has a girlfriend. She feels sad because he won’t be in her life again,” I say.

“How do you feel about that?” Gina asks.

“I’m not jealous, if that’s what you mean,” I say. “We’re just finding out about each other. Neither of us wants to be tied down.”

“How was Charlie?” she asks.

“Cranky as hell,” I say. “She looked like she wanted to saw Holly in half.”

“She’s worried about the competition.”

“Competition for what?”

“For her new daddy?”

“What about Jack?”

“Jack’s a new acquisition. She prefers you.”

“Isn’t it your decision?”

“She’s a six-year-old girl, what do you want? The minute she saw Holly walking up the stairs she demanded I find a way to get her in here so she could check her out.”

I’m puzzled. “How did she see Holly walking up the stairs?”

“She opened the door a crack when she heard the buzzer. She does that a lot. I guess she gets bored.”

”She told me Jack’s married.”

“Married or separated,” Gina says as if the matter isn’t worthy of thought. “Okay, so I’m a bad girl. Sue me.” She flaps her eyelids. “Women like sex, though maybe not in Canada.”

“She made me promise to ask you out on a date.”

“I will if you ask me nicely.”

“Do you want me to get down on one knee?”

“Wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

I get down on one knee and take her right hand in mine.

“Gina will you go out on a date with me?” I ask, looking in her walnut eyes.

“I do – I mean I will.”

I decide not to go home for Christmas break, telling my parents I need to study for my exams, which are scheduled for the week that school resumes. If I go home, I’ll spend all the time arguing about living in New York. Besides, I’ll miss work at WWW, where I’ve just started. Probably not the best idea to miss work when you’ve just started. Instead, my parents come down to spend a weekend with me. They do not fly, which takes an hour; they take the bus, which takes eight hours.

When I answer the door, my mother immediately hands me a surprise – a pot covered with aluminum foil, a gift to show how much she loves me. Inside is a well-done roast beef with little peas so shriveled they look like the face of an 100-year-old person. I hate roast beef with peas. The beef is as tough as leather and as tasty as cardboard. Under Jewish law, all blood must be drained from meat before it is eaten. My mother has interpreted this law to mean all taste must be drained from meat before it is eaten. I repeatedly told my mother I don’t like roast beef with

peas – I particularly despise peas – but she continued to make it. Now, for some unfathomable reason, she has brought it down to New York, on a bus ride that takes eight hours.

I thank my mother, put the pot in the fridge and we go out to find some place for dinner because my mother is very hungry. “Some place close,” my father says, “because your mother can’t walk. She has bad knees.”

About a block away on Sixth Avenue, we pass a steakhouse with sawdust on the floor. I suggest we go there. My father takes a look at the menu posted on the window and makes a face. It’s expensive. “They serve beer here. Do you want me to get shicker?” he says. “Can’t we find a nice family place?” So, off we go to find a nice family place. We walk for an hour but can’t find one. One restaurant is too expensive, another is too fancy, a third too plain. Poor mother, her knee must be killing her. My father seems totally uninterested in the Greenwich Village streets he once knew. Finally, we settle for the steak house.

I order a filet mignon and a beer, just to be difficult. I hate beer; it tastes like piss. But I order it just to see my father groan inwardly. My mother orders a steak well done, but when she cuts into it, it’s still too rare, so she sends it back.

“So are we going to have the pleasure of meeting your lovely girlfriend?” My mother asks when we finally start eating.

My mother talks like a rabbi. She uses very flowery language. She is firm believer in the idea that every noun is naked unless accompanied by an adjective.

“Why do you think I have a girlfriend?” I ask.

“Simon met her at the cafe. A short woman with dark hair. Very pretty. He said the two of you were very friendly,” she says.

Oops. Simon got it wrong. I guess he didn’t want to mention Holly because of Peter.

“I didn’t know you and Simon spoke?” I say,

“We don’t. He told his father, who told Solly and the word got back to us. You know how gossip is.”

“Wow. Just like last time. Telegraph, telephone, tell Solly,” I say. “She’s not my girlfriend. She’s a woman who lives in the building. I babysit for her daughter.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” my father asks.

“How can I have a girlfriend if I’m gay?” I say, starting to get angry.

“It happens,” my mother says. “Men get married and have children and their wives look the other way if they go out to do who knows what. We know of cases.”

“Sounds absolutely great – spending your whole life pretending to be something you’re not,” I say.

“People *want* to be *normal*,” my father says, stretching out the first syllable of the word.

I look at my mother. “I can’t believe you did that -- telling an absolute stranger that your son is gay,” I say, my voice rising. “I can’t think of anything stupider.”

“We didn’t tell him,” she answers. “He came to that conclusion by himself.”

“But you didn’t try to argue him out of it, did you?”

“We didn’t want to have an argument. Uncle Yossie is trying to get a job with him.”

“So you thought you’d get in good with him by telling him a secret nobody else knew.”

She says nothing.

“Who’s more important, Ma, me or Yossie?” I ask, my voice rising.

“You, of course. But Yossie needs a job. He has a lot of trouble keeping jobs. Besides, we didn’t think he would tell anybody.” She scrunches her lower lip against her upper lip and shrugs as if this was the farthest possibility from anyone’s mind.

“I feel used, Ma, totally used. If you’re going to tell personal things about me to others, how can I trust you?”

“Would you have preferred that we said you had a nervous breakdown?” she shoots back, looking down. *Didn’t we have this conversation before?*

“Oh that’s really great. It’s better to be gay than crazy. That makes no sense at all. I didn’t really have a nervous breakdown, you know.”

“You dropped out of McGill,” my father says. “That requires an explanation, doesn’t it? It doesn’t happen every day.”

“Actually, lots of kids drop out of the great temple of learning. Why didn’t you just shut up?”

They don’t answer. My parents have the unfortunate habit of not hearing something they don’t want to listen to. This creates a problem because they assume that I haven’t heard it, too. If I bring it up, they don’t know what I’m talking about.

“We were in a bind,” my father says finally. “We didn’t know what to say. Probably, it would have been better to have kept quiet.”

“Who are you, her spokesman? Dad, a spokesman for Mother ...”

We eat in silence. My mother looks older. Her nose looks longer and the lines on her face seem deeper. She is wearing a large, floppy, brown felt hat trimmed with black fur. It seems out of place in Greenwich Village. My father, who looks uncomfortable, seems smaller.

My father asks if I have given any thought to the future?

“I’ve been thinking of clinical psychology,” I say. “What I’d really like to do is major in English, but I don’t think I’m a very good writer.”

“English,” my father says pointedly, “what can you do with that?”

I groan inwardly. “Teach. I suppose. I could teach at a university. I don’t think I’d be a very good public school teacher. Maybe I could write for a magazine. Maybe I could publish something.”

I already write poems, but you don’t know that.

“Writing. That’s a 20-year career,” my father says. With his heavy Brooklyn accent, it comes out Korea. I wonder what a 20-year Korea is.

“I don’t know. It’s just an idea,” I say.

“When you’re in the public eye, they forget you fast,” my father sneers. “One day you’re up and then you fall fast. The public forgets you and then where are you?”

“So you saying I shouldn’t try because I might fail,” I say.

“No, I’m saying you haven’t got one chance in hell of succeeding,” my father replies.

“You could waste your whole life trying to find out if you can write.”

“I could waste my whole life doing what you want me to,” I say.

We glare at each other.

“If you’re thinking of clinical psychology, you should consider psychiatry,” my mother says quietly but firmly. “For a little extra effort, you can be set for life.”

Oh God, here we go again.

“To become a psychiatrist, I’d have to go to medical school and I can’t go to medical school because I don’t have the grades. I hate all my courses except English. I have no interest in medicine. I only took pre-med to make you happy,” I say, my voice rising again.

“Oh, medicine is *so* interesting,” my mother insists. “People love it. You could have the marks if you applied yourself. You can be a writer when you retire.”

“That’s a great life you’ve sketched out for me, Ma, pretending to be someone I’m not and spending my life doing something I hate so I can do what I like doing when I retire. What if I die first?”

“That way you’ll always have the money to do what you want,” she says.

“You mean I’ll have enough money for a fancy funeral. What can I spend money on when I’m dead?”

I get up to leave, saying, “I’m meeting a man at the gym.”

“It was wonderful to see you,” she says, getting up too. “And are we going to be able to meet your lovely girlfriend?”

“Mother, once and for all, I can’t both be gay and have a girlfriend,” I say.

My mother follows me to the door as my father pays the check. Once outside, she hands me a check for \$500. I look at it, perplexed.

“What’s this for?” I ask.

“A boy needs money,” she says. “Take your lovely girlfriend out to dinner.”

I stare at the check. It’s exorbitant. She’s trying to buy me off for what she said to Solly and I really shouldn’t take it. But I’m no better than anyone else. I stuff the check in my pocket. I will buy a new hat – a boy can’t have too many hats -- and some toys for Charlie.

When I get home, I write in my journal: “My mother talks about being set for life. Is that like concrete? Once it sets, you’re trapped forever, aren’t you? If I do what I want, I’ll probably fail. I’ll probably fly to close to the sun and fall back. But the soaring, that will be wonderful.”

I buy a fedora for myself and a hobby horse for Charlie. It is white with flaring nostrils and she squeals with glee when she rides it.

“Again,” she says. “Again.”

Holly calls to say she's having a party Saturday night. It'll be just like the one Holly Golightly had in "Breakfast at Tiffany's. It'll be a hoot, she promises.

The party is going strong when I arrive, people filling the small room and overflowing onto the terrace outside. As I grab a beer from the kitchen sink counter, Holly's cat, Gigi, jumps down from one of the bookcases and lands on my right shoulder. As I look around confused, she begins rubbing her head against my face. Thinking she's frightened of the crowd, I pet her with my left hand.

As I walk around with the cat on my shoulder, I hear a loud British voice boom out, "The problem I have with her ..." The voice is coming from a man who has a belly the size of a medicine ball and is sitting in the soft chair by the back window. He has dark brown hair with a tuft of yellow at the crown and a bushy beard. Someone says his name is Blum, an NYU lit prof. He seems to be surrounded by acolytes, whom he fixes with a sharp gaze as he speaks. His hobby horse at the moment is a dowager English professor who believes that poetry must inspire readers to take social action.

"I can just see her now," he says, his great booming voice exploding with laughter, "carrying a Kalashnikov in one hand as she runs across the desert and shouts orders to her troops from a book of poems by W.S. Merwin." The acolytes burst out laughing at the thought of the fusty professor in combat fatigues. When the laughter dies down, Blum begins reading "Thou Shalt Not Kill," a Kenneth Rexroth poem that is a lament for Dylan Thomas' death:

They are murdering all the young men,
For half a century now, every day,
They have hunted them down and killed them.
They are killing the young men.
They know ten thousand ways to kill them.
In the slave pens of Siberia,
In the slums of Europe,

In the nightclubs of America,
The murderers are at work.

I think the poem is great, but it's a party and I've had enough. I turn to go and find Holly and almost bump into the blackest man I have ever seen. The man is tall and thin, has a small, red mouth and very long arms. He looks like he could be a dancer.

"I'm Cat," he says.

Thinking the man is talking about Gigi, I say, "No, this isn't my cat. This is Holly's cat."

"No, Cat is my name," he says. "I'm a black cat. Ya dig?"

I'm confused. I put down Gigi, who meows at him and scampers away.

I hesitate for a moment, then put out my hand and say, "I'm Willie."

"You're the guy from Canada," Cat says. "Holly told me to look out for you. How do you like it down here? Warmer, huh?"

I only manage to get out an "I think it's great" before another black man, lighter, shorter and stockier, walks up and asks Cat angrily,

"Nigger, what you talking to this boy for?"

I blanch when I hear the word "nigger."

"I ax you, 'What you talking to this boy, for?"

"This is Mau Mau, by the way," Cat says quietly.

"It's cool. It's cool. I'm just talkin' to a friend of Holly's," he tells Mau Mau.

"Just talkin.' Just talkin.' Fool, don't you know this man is evil? Don't you know this man is Satan. Don't you know there's a war going on?"

"Ain't no war going on in here," Cat says. "Just people hanging out, having fun."

“Hanging out, having fun. Nigga,” Mau Mau explodes, “Our backs are to the wall. They’re shooting us down. They’re hanging us up.”

I’m aghast. I’ve never heard anything like this before.

“They’re shooting us down and you’re standing around having fun.”

He glares at Cat, then turns to Willie.

“I can see by your expression that you’ve never experienced black rage before,” he says.

“Well, black is angry and one day that tide of anger will sweep us all away. You won’t be able to stand on the sidelines and say, ‘I’m not responsible.’ There won’t be any place for you to hide.”

“Now, you can tell yourself that you should escape the angry tide because you’ve always tried to help, but that’s not going to save you,” he goes on, sounding like a preacher. “Things have gotten to the point that when a black man sees a white man, he sees an enemy. He sees Satan. He sees all the lynching and all the slavery and all the years of being invisible. It’s too late.”

“Right on,” says Cat, who flashes a smile that reveals a huge row of perfect white teeth.

I’m taken aback. I regard myself as a friend of blacks. I was disgusted when I saw the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. reports of federal troops escorting black students to attend an integrated school in Little Rock – honest reporting that I have not seen on American TV. I would like to help. Now, two people I’ve never seen before are accusing me of being an enemy.

I shift my weight from one foot to another, looking for some way to escape as the harangue goes on. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Holly on the terrace in a slinky silver dress being ogled by five guys.

Mau Mau turns his attention to Cat, who is still flashing his huge smile.

“And you, jive ass mother, what the fuck you smiling about?” Mau Mau snarls. “You worse than he is. He don’t know any better. But you, you know where it’s at and you still smiling. You not black. You a kneee-grow.”

“I’m as black as your ass,” Cat protests.

“You a kneeee-grow,” Mau Mau shoots back.

They go on like this and I wish I could sink into the floor. My salvation comes when I hear Holly calling me. “Excuse me, I have to go,” I say and beat a hasty retreat. Looking back for an instant, I see Cat and Mau Mau doubling over with laughter and high-fiving each other.

As I make my way to the terrace, I see an extremely pretty woman, probably high on Benzedrine, talking to Holly’s full-length dressing mirror.

“You are not a man,” she says angrily.

“You are not a man.”

“You saved my life,” I say when I get to Holly. “I thought those two guys were going to rip me limb from limb.”

“They were just putting you on Willie. They were just having fun with you. They like to milk liberal guilt.”

“I thought they were going to kill me.”

“They aren’t who they pretend to be,” she says. “They’re not poor blacks from the South. Cat went to Choate – it’s a prep school. Mau Mau’s father teaches at Columbia.”

She introduces me to some Spanish guy whose first name is Javier, a guy who is tall and slim and has dark brown hair falling over his forehead. He has a dazzling smile.

Is this Rusty Trawler? I think.

Holly rubs Javier’s palm, then leads me away, saying, “Let’s go dance.”

“I’m not Holly anymore,” she says once we’re inside. “I’m Pickle.”

“Pickle?” I say, rolling my eyes. “Why are you Pickle?”

“It’s fun,” she says, looking at me as if I was stupid to ask.

We stack 45’s on the record player, then turn it on. I let out a groan when he hears the first song, “Tiger,” by Fabian

“That’s Fabian, the toneless terror,” I shout. “Some manager saw him on the street, thought he was cute and decided to make him a star – as if you could turn a chimpanzee into a singing star.”

“He’s cute,” Holly says.

I bring her in close to me, then spin her around.

“Oh, oh, oh, I’m a tiger,” I sing, trying to sound as off key as he can. “I wanna growl meow.”

Holly gives me a cross-eyed look.

When the song says, “You keep my heart jumpin’ like a kangaroo/ Floatin’ like an onion in a bowl of stew,” I sing, “Floatin’ like a pickle in a bowl of stew.”

Holly – oops, Pickle -- laughs.

I bring Holly into me again and spin her around again, this time hard. She loses her balance and crashes into the record player, knocking it over.

We collapse on the floor. Peals of laughter.

When I show up at WWW the third week, Lou quickly pulls me aside. “We’re sending you out on a story,” he says.

“You can’t send me out on a story,” I protest. “I’m not a reporter. I’m a copyboy. I work here one day a week. I don’t know what to do.”

“You don’t do anything,” Lou replies. “It’s a stakeout. You stand in front of someone’s house and until they come out and say something. Ninety-nine percent of the time, they don’t come out and if they come out, they say nothing. But if they come out and say something and we’re not there, we’re screwed. So get going. We’re at least an hour behind. We’ve been calling all over to try to find someone and nobody’s around, so you’re it. Puttybone will give you the details.”

Puttybone hands me a notebook and a pen, saying, “Now, this is a really big story. We got a tip -- and probably everybody else did too -- that Chloe St. Cloud -- she’s the starlet who was nominated for an Academy Award -- has gotten engaged to Michel Dufort, the French New Wave director.”

I roll my eyes.

“Now, I can tell what you’re thinking: Why is this a story? It’s just gossip. Well young Goldstein, gossip is now news, big news. And you better get used to it. God knows it took me long enough. She’s staying in a townhouse on Waverly Place and Tenth Street. Do you know where that is?”

“It’s about four blocks from my apartment,” I say.

“Good. Here’s a reserve press card. When you get there, take a look around and call in.

“And remember,” Puttybone says in his most patronizing tone, “we’re reporting the hell out of this one. Starfucker’s going to write it. We’re counting on you.”

As I’m walking out the door, Lou stops me. “Nine chances out of ten you won’t see her,” he says, “but if by some strange chance you do and she won’t talk, ask her if she’ll give you the thumb’s up to your questions. You know, you ask the question, she gives you the thumb’s up if it’s true. That way she can deny speaking to you. It works sometimes.”

I nod, feeling more confused than before.

“Here’s ten bucks,” he adds. “Take a cab.”

As the cab lurches downtown, I think, *Starfucker, wow. I’m working with a living legend.*

The taxi deposits me outside the townhouse, where there is a gaggle of reporters and photographers. When I says I’m from WWW, someone says, “Better late than never.” I determine that Chloe hasn’t come out and that nobody answers the doorbell. In short, nothing is happening. I go off to find a pay phone to call in. Reaching into my pocket, I realizes I don’t have a dime, I gave all my change to the cabbie. Damn! I am too embarrassed to go back and ask the other reporters for a dime, so I stop the first friendly face I see, a woman with copper hair who is wearing a short jacket and jeans. Something about her is familiar.

“I’m Willie Goldstein,” I say in a rush. “I work for WWW. It’s my first assignment. I have to find Chloe St. Cloud and ask her if she’s engaged and I don’t have a dime for the pay phone.”

“Calm down, Willie,” the woman says. “I’m Chloe St. Cloud.”

“What? No. You’re not Chloe St. Cloud. I have a picture of her right here.” I pull out a picture from his pocket and look at it. “My God, you *are* Chloe St. Cloud,” I announce, starting to blush.

“So, are you getting married? Where will the ceremony be held? Are you going to move to France? Is he going to move here? Oh God. I don’t know what questions to ask,” I say, panting like a puppy.

“Come on, let’s go over to the Lion’s Head,” the starlet says. “That’s where I was going anyway.”

Once at the famous watering hole, where Holly sometimes works a barmaid, we sit at the bar. Chloe orders a beer and asks me if I would like something.

“A Coke?”

“Beer is fine,” I say.

I can understand why Dufort would want to marry her. Her copper hair is tied in a *bonne*. She has pale green eyes, a round face, a small triangle of a nose and a red mouth. She looks like a young Jeanne Moreau, like Catherine in *Jules and Jim*. There is also something familiar about her that is on the tip of my tongue.

“You look like Catherine in *Jules and Jim*,” I say, trying to loosen her tongue.

“That’s a great compliment,” St. Cloud says. “Jeanne Moreau is a really beautiful woman.”

“You’re cute, too,” she says, ruffling my hair.

“So what’s the deal with you getting married?” I ask.

“I’d like to help you, but I’m under contract to *Snap* magazine,” she says.

“What does that mean?”

“I get paid for telling them all my news first.”

“Sound like your whole life is scripted.”

Scowling, she shakes her head up and down in agreement.

“If you have to tell everything to *Snap*, what are all those idiots doing outside the townhouse?”

“That was Michel’s idea. To give publicity to his new film,” Chloe says. “The house belongs to one of Michel’s friends. He’s not there. It’s empty. Michel’s in Paris and I’m at my apartment.”

“So, we’re both being used?”

“Welcome to the big wide world of journalism, Willie.”

Just then, I remember what is so familiar about Chloe.

“I saw you at Holly’s party, didn’t I?” I ask.

“Are you Holly boyfriend? I remember someone saying she has a boyfriend named Willie.”

“I’m him,” I say. “You were having a violent argument with a mirror.”

“I was rehearsing a scene.”

“It looked like you were high on bennies.”

“Not bennies,” she says sotto voce. She quickly adds, “You’re not going to use that are you?”

“No, but I have an idea. Why don’t I ask you if you and Michel are getting married and you give me a thumb’s up. That way, you technically won’t be breaking your contract. Besides, if the Worldwide Wire Service runs a story about you, you’ll get ten times the publicity you’ll get from *Snap*.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s do it. Are you and Michel engaged?”

She gives him a thumb’s up.

“And you’ll be getting married where?”

“We’re still working out the details,” she says. “Probably in France. His family owns a farm.”

“Okay, great,” Willie says, then quickly adds, “Wait, I need a quote. They’ll kill me if I don’t get a quote.” I think for a moment.

“You’re desperately in love, aren’t you?”

“We’re desperately in love,” she says. “I don’t know when I’ve had such feelings. I think about him every moment.”

I use the bar phone to call the office. Puttybone picks up and without giving me a chance to speak, starts in, “Didn’t get anything, huh? I didn’t think so. Sending a cub to do a reporter’s work. Well come on back.”

“Seagull, wait! Don’t hang up!” I shout. “I got her.”

“Got whom? Who did you get?”

“Chloe. She’s getting married. I got the whole story.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that some pissant cub reporter who never covered a story in his life got a famously difficult actress to talk to him.”

“Tongue action, Puttybone,” I say, improvising furiously. “I promised to give her some of my famous tongue action. Lap, lap, lap. Drives the girls wild.”

“Good answer,” says Chloe, squeezing my arm.

“She’s right here, Puttybone. Ask her yourself.”

“No, I believe you,” Puttybone says dejectedly. “I’ll give you to Starfucker. Damn, he’s on the phone. I’ll give you to Cathy.”

I quickly give in my notes, explaining about the thumb’s up and suggesting that Cathy use that as the lede. Cathy says “good job” and tells me that an URGENT will be on the wire in a minute. She hands me back to Puttybone.

“Tell me, tell me young Goldstein that we have pictures of the fair damsel. If we don’t, Lou will have a cow. You *did* make contact with the photographer when you arrived at the scene. It’s the first thing you’re supposed to do, you know.”

“I would have made contact with the photographer if I had any idea who in hell he is,” I reply. “It’s my first time on a story, remember?”

“Well, I’ll send the photographer right over,” Puttybone says.

“Puttybone, send someone over from the office. You don’t want to spook the pack.”

A photog arrives in a few minutes and takes a shot of Chloe with her thumb up in front of the bar’s expansive mirror. That way, the shot has two images, one of the actress and one of her reflection.

I give Chloe an air kiss and tell her I’ll watch for the movie. The photographer gives me a lift back to the office and when I arrive, I’m given a hero’s welcome. “Good job,” says Lou, shaking my hand. Other editors smile warmly. The TV sets above the national desk are all reading his story:

“Thumb’s up.”

“That’s how super starlet Chloe St. Cloud reacted when asked whether she will wed famed New Wave director Michel Dufort.”

“Nice job,” says Puttybone in a voice even more patronizing than before. “We had a brief scare about the photos, but in the end, everything worked out.”

“Nice job, kid,” says Starfucker, “but you should have called it in to me. I was working the story.”

I nod and walk away.

Wow, Mighty Starfucker is jealous of a kid who never covered a story before.

The next day, my mother calls, very excited.

“Son, son, you’re on the front page of the Montreal Star,” she says.

“Yeah, did they use my story?”

“Yes, yes, you have a nice space in the left corner.”

“Why don’t you send me a copy?”

“I will! I will! It’s so well written and you were so clever to think of that way of asking the question.”

“Actually, Ma, I didn’t write the story. I dictated my notes to someone else and she wrote it. As for the thumb’s up, the managing editor suggested that. I didn’t think that up at all.”

“Well, it’s still a front-page story.”

“Yeah, it got big play all over the world.”

“I wonder what you’re high school friends will think?”

“They probably won’t make the connection. I doubt that I’m foremost in their minds.”

My mother goes on and on, sounding like I’ve just won the Pulitzer instead of dictating some notes about a starlet getting married, which for all I know could be a pure publicity stunt.

But after my triumph with Chloe, I get sent out every week: a fire in the Bronx, a hostage-taking on the Upper West Side, a shooting in Brooklyn, a bank robbery in the Village. I’m a leg man. I get the details and quotes and phone them into a rewrite. The fact I’m shy works to my advantage. I call people aside after the other reporters are finished with them, tell them I’m new and ask them questions. My manner puts them at ease and they often tell me more than they’ve told the others. At first, I think what I’m doing is silly, but the more I do it, the more I like it. I even enjoy the stakeouts -- hanging out in some neighborhood, sometimes for hours, waiting for some source to come out. I imagine myself living there, meeting with the people.

On the days I take care of Charlie, Gina makes me dinner and then we sing folk songs. Sometimes, Abe comes up and we play the blues.

One night, Gina announces she is forming a folk group and asks me if I want to join. I tell her I might want to, but don't think I could ever play in front of people, but she suggests I come to a rehearsal and see how I feel afterward.

A few days later, she has the group over to practice and I am very surprised to find Cat is among them. I call Gina aside.

"What's he doing here," I ask. "I don't think he likes white people very much. He gave me a very hard time at Holly's party the other night. He and his friend Mau Mau suggested I was a racist because I haven't picked up a gun to go fight segregation in the South."

Gina gives me a quizzical look. "You're wrong, Willie," she says. "Cat's a real sweetheart. He's my guitar teacher. He's the one that really formed this group." She motions to him.

Cat comes over with long, loping strides, showing some teeth.

"Hi, Cat," I says warily.

"It's Clarence, actually," he says, still flashing those teeth. "I guess an apology is in order. We gave you a pretty hard time at the party, but hey, you're from Canada. You can take it. We were just putting you on. We were just acting out the stereotypes white people have about black people. It's fun. White people don't know what to think."

"Well, thank you for telling me," I say, smiling weakly.

The trio starts practicing "Pastures of Plenty."

"Eric, you sing lead," Clarence, who plays guitar and bass, tells the third member of the trio, who plays guitar and a lightning-fast banjo.

“I’m going to lay down a simple bass line on the A minor chord for four bars.”

He plays dum, dum, dum, dum-dum. A G A E-G.

“After four bars, Eric, you come in on the banjo for two bars. Then after those two bars, Gina, you come in on the guitar for another two bars. Got it?”

They rehearse it once, then Eric begins: “It’s a mighty hard road that these poor hands have hoed,”

Gina and Clarence: “Our poor feet have traveled down this hot, dusty road.”

Eric: “On the edge of your cities you’ll see us and then,”

All: “We come with the dust and we’re gone ---”

Clarence stops them. “Here we’re going to do something fancy. The way Woody Guthrie wrote, it’s just D minor. But we’re going to do it D, then F to make it stand out more. He demonstrates: “Go—one with the wind.”

“It highlights it, makes it more powerful.”

They try it: “We come with the dust and we’re go—one with the wind.”

The trio stops rehearsing “Pastures of Plenty” and begins work “The Water is Wide,” in which Clarence has a solo.

Clarence, who has a deep bass voice, sings:

“The water is wide, I cannot cross over,
“And neither have I wings to fly.”

His voice is strong, powerful and sonorous and commands you to listen.

On the third verse, Eric adds a melody on the high strings of the guitar and harmonizes with Clarence. On the fourth verse, all three sing, filling Gina’s living room – and probably the street outside -- with soaring voices:

“Build me a boat that can carry two,

“And both will row, my love and I.”

When the rehearsal is over, Gina asks me, “What about it? Would you like to join?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I still don’t think I’m good enough.”

“You guys are great,” I add. “I’m really impressed.”

“We better be,” she says. “We’ve signed up for the open mike at the Gaslight in three weeks.”

Back in my apartment, I sing and play “Pretty Saro,” the song I learned from the girl by the fountain, and “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” from a poem by William Butler Yeats:

“I went out to the hazel wood because a fire was in my head ...”

I could never play in front of people, but it would be great to do it.

In the middle of the week, Lou calls and says he wants to talk to me and suggests I stop by the Lion’s Den, where staffers traditionally have drinks Wednesday night. When I get there, there are no seats at the table, so Lou orders Starfucker, who is sitting next to him, to move down and finds me a chair from another table. Everyone is in shirt sleeves except for Starfucker, who is wearing a blazer. Sitting directly across from me is Dante, an editor who has a long, grey ponytail. Next to him is Carlos, a music reviewer who has curly black hair and talks like he is eating a sandwich rapidly. Bite, chew, chew, chew. Bite, chew, chew, chew, chew. Carlos is talking about hipsters and explaining the meaning of the expression “I dig.” “Neither knowledge nor imagination comes easily (bite), it is buried in the pain of one’s forgotten experience (chew, chew, chew), and so one must work to find it (bite), one must occasionally exhaust oneself by *digging* into the self in order to perceive the outside. And indeed, it is essential to dig the most, for if you do not dig you lose your superiority over the square (chew, chew, chew, chew). I give Lou a quizzical glance. He shrugs.

The waitress comes up to take my order. “Hi, Willie,” she says.

It’s Chloe, the starlet.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“Well, when I work on a film, I get very well paid. And when I don’t work on a film, I work here. A girl’s gotta eat.”

“So, have you set the date yet.”

“Willie . . . that was a very nice story. Got play all over the world. Michel and his people loved it.”

“It was just a story?”

“Willie, that’s the business we’re in. Don’t be discouraged. How’s Holly, by the way?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen her in a few weeks.”

“Oh, poor Willie,” she says and goes off to get me a beer.

Once she’s gone, Starfucker, who has been trying to listen in to our conversation, lowers his head and says, “Listen, can you do me a favor? Give me her phone number.”

“I don’t have her number, Starfucker,” I reply.

“You don’t have her number?”

“Nope. I only interviewed her once for a few minutes. I didn’t think I should press my luck.”

“You should always get the home phone of people you interview. What if the desk had a question late at night. Go ask her now.”

I walk away, pretend I ask Chloe a question and come back.

“No go, Starfucker. She says she’s heard of your reputation.”

“My reputation?” he says as if he can’t imagine what he’s just heard.

“She also said that if she had a choice between doing it with you or doing it to herself, she’d opt to do it to herself.”

The table erupts in laughter.

Starfucker, the inveterate skirt chaser, colors but doesn’t miss a beat.

“You really should get that number,” he says. “What would happen if there was an emergency and you had to reach her.”

“I’d call my girlfriend,” I reply, cool as ice. “They know each other. She has the number.”

“Why don’t you ask Starfucker for him for *his* girlfriend’s number, Willie?” Dante snickers.

Lou tugs me by the sleeve, indicating I should sit down. Once I do, he says he has something he wants to tell me.

I’ve been doing really well at work, he says, and I can have a permanent job if I want it. If I want to remain in college, he’ll understand, but I should definitely come and work full-time in the summer. I tell him that I’d probably prefer to stay in college and get my degree in English, but I definitely want to work for WWW this summer. We shake hands. Good deal.

Chloe brings me my beer. When I lift my glass, I notice that there’s a man watching me closely. I’ve seen him before. He’s a public relations man named Howie, a stout fellow with silver hair who’s wearing a red plaid jacket and khaki pants. It makes him look like JoJo the Clown. He’s been making the rounds of the tables at the Lion’s Den tonight.

“Howie the flak’s here,” I tell Lou.

He groans. “Must be up to no good.”

“What’s his last name?”

“I don’t know. Kapowie, maybe. I don’t think I’ve ever heard anybody call him anything but Howie.

“That your new boy there, Lou?” Howie calls over.

“Member of the Kennedy family,” Lou replies, without missing a beat.

Howie saunters over to me, extending his hand.

“Hello, son. I’m Howie. I saw you talking to Chloe and the two of you seemed to hit it off. Well, I’m her rep and if you interview her and do a good job, I’ll bet I can get her to go out with you.” Two big winks so I can’t help but get the message. The asshole obviously doesn’t know I’ve written a nice story about Chloe.

I stand up, declining to shake his hand. “Why don’t I go over and see if she’ll talk to me.”

I walk over to Chloe and stand with my back to Howie. I take a \$20 bill from my pocket.

“Chloe, see that cretin over there in the clown jacket. He says he’s your rep and if I write a nice story about you, he’ll let me sleep with you. I’ll give you \$20 to go over and slap his face.”

“He’s not my rep. He’s just a creep who’d like to become my rep. Put your money away. I’ll do it for nothing.”

With that, she marches smartly over to Howie and slaps him on the right cheek so hard the sound echoes through the bar.

“What are you, my pimp?” she growls.

“Did I do something wrong?” he whimpers, holding his chin, where a welt is forming.

“Yes. You told Willie Goldstein that I’d sleep with him if he wrote a nice story about me.”

“No I didn’t. I said I’d try to arrange a date for him if he wrote a nice story about you. There’s a big difference.”

“There’s no difference,” Chloe snarls, and slaps him just as fiercely on his left cheek. He is almost in tears.

The people at the WWW table are howling with laughter, their sides splitting.

Chloe winks at me as she walks back to her waitress’ station.

“So you ratted me out, huh son,” Howie says, trying to recover a speck of his wounded pride. “That was a bad move. You’re finished in this town. I know people. I have influence. I’ll never give you anything.”

I walk over and look him straight in the eye.

“First, you’re not Chloe’s rep because if you were, you’d know I’ve already written a story about her. Second, I haven’t been in this business long, but I know that if you want me to do a story, you’ll stick your tongue up my ass, your wife will give me a blow job and you’ll ask me if I want to spend the night with your daughter.”

“You can’t talk to me like that,” he says, his anger rising. He looks at me for a moment, then quickly looks down.

“You want to step outside?” he says. “Let’s go outside and settle this man to man.”

“No, let’s step inside. I’m quaking, Howie. I’m quaking with the fear of fighting a middle-aged man with a paunch.”

We put up our dukes and sort of circle each other. People stand up and circle round. Since the crowd is pretty lubricated and nobody much likes Howie, they egg me on. “Kill the lying bastard! Kick the shit out of the mouterfucker!! Smash his face in!

I let him land a weak punch on my shoulder and then say, “Look up,” He takes the bait and looks up for a second.

“Kapowie!” I shout and smash him in the solar plexus with all my might.

“Aaaah . . . I can’t breathe. Help me. I’m blacking out. I’m gonna fall.” Someone helps Howie to a chair and he sits there, panting.

I flash a toothy smile and thrust my right fist into the air. Dante shakes my hand, saying, “You’re going to fit right in here. You’re a misfit just like the rest of us. We’re all misfits and wire services and newspapers are the last refuge of misfits. When I walked into my first paper, a weekly in Lake Charles, Louisiana, I knew I had found my home.”

A few moments later, Howie, who is breathing normally, comes over to talk to me. “You know, despite everything, I like you,” he says. “You’re aggressive. You don’t take no for an answer. Have you ever thought of a career in public relations.”

On the day of the open mike, a Friday, Gina pounds furiously on my door.
“Open up, Willie. I have to speak to you about something.”

Enjoying a lazy day in my pajamas, I open the door grumpily.

“What’s wrong,” I say.

“Clarence has laryngitis. He woke up this morning with it. He thought it would get better, but it hasn’t. He can’t play tonight,” Gina says breathlessly.

“Why don’t you reschedule? They have open mikes every week,” I say.

“We tried. They’re filled up for the next six weeks. And besides, we told all our friends. I have people coming down from Jersey. She takes my hand, “Willie, you could sing with us. You know the songs. I’ve heard you playing them.”

“I’d like to do it,” I say, “but my guitar sounds like cat’s whiskers and I hate performing. I can’t stand to have people looking at me. I perspire, I blush, I run out of breath and go flat. My mind goes blank and I forget the lyrics. I can’t stand to have people looking at me.”

“A stiff drink will settle your nerves and you can use my guitar. I’ll use Clarence’s. You like my guitar, don’t you?” Gina says.

“I love your guitar, but I’ve never sung or played with you.”

“We’ll rehearse before the show. We have time. You just have to play simple chords. And if you forget the harmony, you can just sing the melody,” Gina says.

“Who’s going to take care of Charlie?”

“I’ll bring her with me,” Gina says. “It won’t be that late.”

“Willie, please,” she pleads, tilting her head to one side and looking him directly in the eye. “It’s really important to me – I’ll make you a steak.”

“Okay, but we gotta rehearse first. We can’t do this cold,” I say.

“I knew the steak would do it,” she says.

The rehearsal goes well until we get to “The Water is Wide.”

I start singing, then immediately stop.

“I can’t do this,” I say. “The song needs Clarence’s voice, a powerful bass voice, not a baritone like mine. It’s not going to work. It’ll sound lousy.”

“It’ll sound fine,” Eric says. “Have some confidence in yourself.”

“It won’t sound fine,” I say. “Why don’t you do it, Eric?”

“I’m already soloing on ‘Pastures of Plenty.’ I don’t think it will be good for me to have two solos,” Eric says.

“Alright, give me a second,” I say. “I think I have a solution.”

I go downstairs and bring back the words to “Pretty Saro.”

“Let’s do this one,” I say. “I know it and it only has four chords, G, C, D⁷ and B minor. I’ll sing the first verse. You guys can do oohs on the second verse and Gina can come in on the last two lines of the third verse.”

They sing it a few times and it works.

“Let’s go then, we’re going to be late,” Gina says.

“Wait,” I say. “Let me get my hat.”

We go on third and begin with “Morning Dew.”
Gina sings:

“Walk me out in the morning dew my honey,
“Walk me out in the morning dew today.”

Eric and I answer:

“I can't walk you out in the morning dew my honey,
“I can't walk you out in the morning dew today.”

Gina’s voice is clear as a bell; it cuts through the room. It’s not as piercing as Joan Baez’ voice, but you can hear every nuance. The minute she opens her mouth, everybody sits up and pays attention.

As the song goes on, Gina’s voice becomes more plaintive. The group gets a good hand when the song is over.

We immediately swing into “Pastures of Plenty,” Eric playing Clarence’s bass part on the guitar. Gina sings the high notes to make a great harmony on the “go -- one with the wind.” The crowd likes the bouncy number and the group also gets a good hand for this song and then it’s Willie’s turn.

Gina steps up to the microphone. “Our regular member, Clarence, has laryngitis, so Willie is taking his place,” she says. “And he’s very nervous, so be very nice to him.”

I begin a simple strum in time with the 3/4 time of the music. I slide my fingers two frets up the fingerboard and back to provide some variety. Eric lays down a simple line on the bass and Gina puts a capo on the fifth fret of the fingerboard and plays arpeggios, giving the music the quality of a tinkling bell.

I look out at the crowd. *God, look at all those people. I can’t believe I let her talk me into this. I can’t imagine how singers and actors do it. I’m going to forget the lyrics. My voice is going to crack. I’m going to mess things up. I need to find somebody to look at. They say when you give a speech, you should deliver it to one person. There’s Charlie. Maybe I can pretend I’m singing to her. But she’s looking around, she’s not looking at me. She’s bored. She’s really too young for this sort of thing. Well, what the hell, here we go. Strum the G, slide up two frets and back.*

“Down in some lone valley,”

Change to D!!! Change to D!!!

“In a long, lonesome place.”

Back to G. Back to G.

“Where the wild birds do whistle,”

Slide up and back.

“And there notes do increase.”

Change to D.

And quickly, I lose myself in the song. My voice is rough, but it doesn’t crack. As the song goes on, I sing with more expression.

And then it is over.

People start clapping and cheering. *They're applauding for me. They like me. Amazing. Guess I didn't fuck up.*

And copying what I have seen on a record album cover, I take off my hat with my left hand and bow slightly from the waist. And as I do that, I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror on the right side of the stage. *I'm a star, the man I always wanted to be when I sat in my room and watched myself in the mirror playing the guitar. Come what may, I can always use this image to make myself happy.*

My reverie is interrupted by two arms wrapped tightly around my chest. They belong to Gina.

“Willie, you were wonderful,” she says – and gives me a big kiss.

The Gaslight manager says he likes us and if we learn more songs, he might give us a gig. He urges us to stay for the next act, Bob Dylan, who he predicts will be a big star. Dylan is the kid with the wild hair and machine-gun guitar that Holly and I saw at Folk City. Tonight, he is much more polished, quietly accompanying himself with guitar and harmonica:

It ain't no use in turning on your light, babe
That light I never knowed
And it ain't no use in turning on your light, babe
I'm on the dark side of the road

He has the voice of a strangled crow (and mumbles a bit, too), but I don't mind his voice and I like the biting irony of his song. “I really think he's really going to be a star,” Gina says.

“Musical tastes are changing. People don't want Frank Sinatra any more.”

In early April, after I haven't seen Holly (she's gone back to being called that) for a few weeks, she calls to say she is thinking of going to Argentina with Javier, whose family owns a big ranch there. Just like Holly Golightly did in "Breakfast at Tiffany's."

"It's going to be an adventure," she says. "We're going to ride wild horses on the pampas and sleep out under the stars and have fun."

I object that Holly Golightly didn't go to Argentina, she went to Brazil and she went by herself because her Javier dumped her after she was arrested for being a mobster's courier.

"Besides," I say, "I never knew you could ride."

"I'm taking lessons."

"What about me?" I ask.

"Oh, Willie. I'm so sorry," she says, "but I really love Javier. There's real magic between us. Please say it's okay for me to go. You can't cage a wild thing."

"You said there was magic between us."

"There is – there was. Besides, he's rich. You will never be rich, Willie."

"His family owns a ranch in Argentina?"

"Well . . . it's really in Louisiana."

"Oh, so you're going to ride horses on the bayou?"

"Oh, Willie, please say it's all right for me to go."

School is ending in just over a month, so I suggest she finish the semester, but Holly says she will take incompletes and make up the work when she gets back (if she gets back). I assume she's done this before and that is why she's so far behind at school.

I reluctantly offer my blessing. I'm hurt, but what else can I do? Holly throws herself into things without knowing how they'll turn out. That is how she learns about the world. Javier's

family probably owns a chicken farm and she'll probably tire of him quickly, but right now the idea sounds very romantic.

After I don't hear from her for a few days, I assume she's left.

With Holly gone, Gina and I finally go out on our long-awaited date. When I pick her up, I do a double take: she looks like Marilyn Monroe. Her shoulder-length black hair is now short and curly, accenting her face, and she has raspberry lips and those famous walnut eyes. She is wearing teardrop-shaped pearl earrings and a tiny gold necklace. There is a smudge of makeup accenting her cheeks and her eyes are finely outlined in black. She is wearing the slinky black dress – just a cut above the knees -- that she wore when she first asked me to babysit for Charlie.

She is so pretty I can hardly speak. Her face is almost perfectly symmetrical. Her chin is like a polished rock. I just stand and look at her. Finally I say, "You cut your hair."

"Yes, do you like it?"

"Very much," I get out.

She links her arm in mine and we go to see "The Hustler," the powerful, new movie starring Paul Newman and Jackie Gleason, which is playing nearby. Gina tucks her legs under her on her seat and leans her head against my shoulder. I fight my feelings. I really want to grab her, but I still have feelings for Holly, plus Gina is married – and, altruist that I am, I don't want to interfere in someone's marriage. I resist my desires while the shots of playing pool are on the screen, but when the movie shifts to a more static study of winners and losers, being on top and being on the bottom, I press my lips to hers and explore her mouth with my tongue. She has a warm, soft mouth. I put my hand on her knee and she doesn't play the push-the-hand-away game. But after a moment, I take my hand away, feeling it has no business being there. We kiss

until the pool-playing scenes start again. When the movie ends, we keep repeating Newman's last line to Gleason to each other and laughing: "Fat man, you shoot a great game of pool."

Gina wants to go to a dive bar on Seventh Avenue called Kremlin, which is all right because Charlie is having a sleep over so we don't have to get back at any particular time to relieve the babysitter. She leads me to an unmarked door and we go in.

The bar has two levels. The upper level has two shiny red and chrome 1952 Vincent motorcycles, or so the bouncer, a mountain man with hair down to his shoulders and a wooly red beard, tells me. There are also some chairs and a few saggy, saggy couches where couples are making out. Down the door on the left is a stage and seating area. There is graffiti on the walls and all sorts of strange objects that reflect light, but because the light is so dim, I can't make out what they really are. In the back of the seats is a dancing area with couches on either side and behind that, a long bar that never seems to have a bartender. The smell is a combination of marijuana and latrine.

The featured act is Rick Berlin, a rocker from Boston known for his raunchy lyrics. Berlin, an older man, has shoulder-length straggly hair and a seamed face that suggests hard living. He sings:

Happy lesbians, in the snow,
Throwing snowballs, ma-a-a-king angels,
All the boys stand around
Wishing they were lesbians.

The lyrics get wilder, something about lying on the floor with a labrador. I redden slightly and Gina pats my arm as if to say, "There, there."

Berlin gets a huge round of applause when he finishes and he immediately amps up the sound and launches into a pounding rock song whose lyrics I can't make out. Everybody starts

clapping in time with the music. “I want to dance,” Gina says, and we make our way to the back of the bar. She stops to talk to some women she knows and one of them slips some powder into my pocket with instructions that I sniff deeply. I do and nothing happens immediately. In a few moments, though, I get a quiet jolt of energy and my eyes close down like a camera lens focusing on a bright object. I could party all night. Gina is dancing on the bar with a group of other people. Right foot kick, left foot kick. It looks like fun, so I join her. Right foot kick, left foot kick. Very clumsy. Can’t ever imagine my doing something like this. Right foot kick, left foot slur.

“Are you having fun?” she asks with an evil smile.

“Absolutely,” I say.

Left foot kick, left foot kick.

Little soldiers are marching in my brain. Can’t tell my left from my right.

Suddenly, a fight breaks out near one of the couches. It seems that two tall, skinny men are fighting over a girl – or is it a man? I jump down and extend my arms. Gina falls into them and I swing her around and onto the floor. We sneak around the edges of the fight and leave the bar.

“Did you enjoy that?” I ask.

“Loved it,” she says.

We wander the Village, kidding around and drifting toward our apartment building.

When we are a few blocks away, a man and a woman hurry by us. The woman looks familiar. A few moments pass before I make the connection.

“Holly,” I shout.

She stops. She is with Josh.

“I thought you left for Louisiana,” I say.

“I couldn’t make up my mind,” she says almost sotto voce.

Josh suggests the four of us go and have a drink, but the women are eyeing each other like two dogs waiting to see if the other makes a move. So I say we have to go home and release the babysitter.

When we get to our building, Gina says, “Walk me to my door.” I do and as I reach to kiss her goodnight, she says, “Come in for a nightcap.” Instead of coffee or liquor, she expertly rolls a joint, saying coyly, “Bet you thought a woman my age could never do that.” She puts a jazz station on the radio and we sit there passing the joint around. The sound comes in waves, swelling and ebbing. I can hear the sizzle of the ride cymbal. The pot and the powder I snorted earlier are a bad combination: My mind is full of feathers and bowling balls. Sometimes I giggle. So does Gina.

We start necking. I hold her close to me, rub her behind and then start moving my hand up her thigh. She sucks my tongue so hard it tingles. “Let’s go in the bedroom,” she whispers. I want her, but having just seen Holly, I feel conflicted. And then, they’re the matter of those drugs.

“I’m not sure I can rise to the occasion,” I say.

“Nonsense,” she says.

She unzips my zipper, pulls down my shorts, takes my penis in her hand and squeezes it. Then she kisses the tip and starts sucking it. For a moment I am startled, wondering how she could perform such an intimate act with a man she’s never been with before. But in a second, I don’t care. I have a huge erection and my heart is beginning to pound.

“There,” she says with a devilish smile. “I was sure I could take care of it.”

She leads me into the bedroom, where we pull down the sheets and kick off our clothes. She has beautiful, full breasts with dark nipples. I squeeze and suck her nipples and she rubs my penis against her dark triangle. Then, she puts my penis between her breasts, squeezes them together and starts sucking the tip. This is incredibly exciting and I am at the point of coming, breathing deeply, when she says, “Wait.”

She grabs my penis, throbbing painfully, and kneels down on the bed with her head on the pillow. She guides me inside herself from behind and starts moving her hips up and down. I hold her hips and begin moving inside her faster and faster. She touches her nipples with one hand and her triangle with the other. She begins to trembling, gasps sharply three times and says, “Now.” We both explode.

We fall asleep for a short while. When we wake up, her face is the color of a rose and I kiss her gently. I feel bound to her the way I did after I slept with Holly.

“You were wonderful,” I say.

“Aren’t older women great?”

“Shiksas are wild. Every Jewish boy should have one.”

For the first time, I pay attention to her body. She has the long legs and high waist that I find so attractive – plus a neat little triangle.

We do it again.

I wake up in the morning to the sound of somebody pounding on the door.
“Willie, Willie, let me in! Let me in!”

“It’s Holly. What should I do?”

“Go see what she wants,” says a drowsy Gina. “She’ll wake the whole building.”

I pull on shirt and pants and open the door.

“I came to take you to breakfast and apologize for jerking you around, but you weren’t there.”

“So you came up here?”

“Did you sleep with her?” she asks angrily. “Tell me.”

“No, I just came up for a cup of coffee.”

“Without your shoes and socks?”

“What’s the big deal if I did sleep with her? You slept with Javier. You sleep with Josh.”

“Everybody knows I sleep around, Willie. It’s no secret. I thought you were different.”

She bursts out crying and rushes down the stairs.

“I don’t think I did anything wrong,” I tell Gina.

“You don’t know anything about women, Willie,” she says. “Holly is jealous.”

When Gina goes to pick up Charlie from her sleepover, I go out for a walk. When I get back who should be sitting on my stoop but Simon.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I ask.

“I need to talk to you,” he says.

“Haven’t I made it clear you’re the last person in the world I want to talk to?”

“There’s something important I need to talk to you about. Please, let’s go upstairs?”

“No Simon, we can’t go upstairs. Don’t you understand I think you’re a worthless piece of shit?”

“This is really important.”

As we’re arguing, Gina and Charlie are coming home.

“Hi, daddy,” Charlie says when she sees me. She runs up and gives me a big hug around the waist.

“Hello Char-lotte,” I say. “How are you?”

“I told you never to call me that,” she says with mock fury, her lips pursed. “My name is Charlie. Now apologize.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“You were really great last night,” Gina says with a Satanic smile. “Really strong.”

“We aim to please,” I say. Simon looks bewildered.

“And this is your boyfriend,” she says, turning to Simon. “Back for another visit. Sy, isn’t it?”

“Simon,” he says tonelessly.

“Well, we’re going upstairs,” Gina says. “Would you like to come up for some tea?”

“Thanks, but we have something to discuss – man to man,” I say.

“Well you men have your big man-to-man powwow,” Gina says. “I’m sure our cheeks would be burning. Nice to see you again, Sy – I mean Simon.” She and Charlie disappear inside.

“Let’s go upstairs before we see any more of my neighbors,” I say resignedly.

Once we’re in my apartment, Simon asks me why Charlie calls me daddy.

“I don’t know. Because she’s six years old. What does it matter?”

“Are you dating her mother,” he asks.

“Must be. That’s what you told my mother.”

“Never did.”

“Of course not. What’s so important that you came all the way down here to discuss it with me.”

“Eliane is pregnant,” he says.

I'm stunned. I feel like the air has been knocked out of me. For a moment I feel sorry for him, but then I think, That's one way to prove you're not a fifi.

"Why didn't you use a rubber? They sell rubbers in Montreal, don't they?"

"We need your help to find an abortion doctor."

"You've got to be kidding. Why me? Don't they have abortion doctors in Montreal?"

"We tried. We couldn't find anyone. We looked in other cities, too. We really need your help."

"What about Peter? He must know someone. He has all those political connections."

"He said he was sorry but he couldn't help. He said the congressman is liberal, but how would it look if it got out that his aide had arranged an abortion."

"Sounds chickenshit to me. How about the pater? He's a big man in Montreal, isn't he? He must know someone."

"He doesn't. He suggested we try you."

"Me? How can I help you? I don't even have a regular doctor."

"You're a reporter. You have sources. You have connections."

"Oh, you saw my story," I say. "But I'm not really a reporter. I'm a copyboy. I get coffee and lunch. Sometimes, they send me out on stories. I got lucky this time. I don't have sources or connections."

"Look, there's a network called Jane. I think it's based in Chicago. You call a number and they'll hook you up with an abortionist."

"So call the number."

"I don't have the number. You could get it by asking people at work."

“I’m not going to ask people at work. If I asked people at work, they’ll think I knocked up Gina. Newsrooms are beehives of gossip. I couldn’t do that to her.”

“You could ask Gina?”

“No. I can’t,” I say. “I can’t imagine that she knows. She’d have to ask somebody at work and then they’d think I knocked her up. They already think we’re sleeping together.”

“Aren’t you? The two of you seemed very friendly.”

“No, I’m gay, remember.”

“You’ve got to help,” he says, his anger growing. “You’re our last resort. We’ve tried everything else.”

“What if I find you someone,” I say. “What if he’s some backroom guy and Eliane dies. I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t bear to be responsible for another person’s death.”

“If Eliane has the baby, it’ll destroy both our lives.”

“You’re being dishonest. You want Eliane to have an abortion so you can leave her and be with Peter with no strings attached. You’re just trying to take the easy way out. You’re just thinking of yourself.”

“No, I love Eliane. It’s just that we’re too young to have a baby.”

“You’re really fucked up if you think I believe that,” I say. “You used Eliane and now you’re trying to use me. It’s just like with Jean-Louis. You need someone to clean up your mess.”

I am reaching my boiling point. I stare Simon in the eye.

“Jean-Louis could have used your help. He might be alive now if you hadn’t ignored him. Every time I think of it. I get furious.

“If you want my help, say it. Say you’re gay. Say you’re a fifi.”

He says nothing, but grabs my guitar. “Nice guitar,” he says.

“Put the guitar down,” I say.

“Fat slob,” he says, and smashes into the floor.

He mocks me, saying, “Come on fatty, come on dumb slob, take me on, be a man.”

He puts up his fists and I hit him in the right bicep. He winces.

“Oh, that really hurt. Tough man,” he says.

He rushes at me and lands a good one in the stomach. It hurts and I can’t think for a second. Then the adrenaline kicks in.

I glance to my left and say, “Look, there’s someone at the window.”

He turns his head for a second and I hit him as hard as I can in the Adam’s apple.

“Aaah.” He steps back. “I can’t breathe.”

He leans against the wall, mouth open, breathing in and out quickly, desperately trying to catch his breath.

“What’s the matter, Sy, can’t you take it. Just one little punch. Can’t you take it, fifi?”

“You’re ... not ... fighting ... fair,” he manages to get out between breaths.

“Not playing fair. Aw, chip, chip, chip. Is the poor little fifi being picked on by that nasty bully Willie?”

And I hit him as hard as I can in the solar plexus.

“Huuuh.”

I can hear the wind being knocked out of him. The color drains from his face and he drops to his knees.

“Not playing fair, huh?” I sneer. “We’re playing by my rules, now. Were you playing fair when you walked away without talking to Jean-Louis?”

And suddenly, all the anger toward Jay Jay I've repressed comes flooding out and the gym teacher and Simon become one. "We you playing fair when you made me run around the track till I collapsed?" I lash out. The words rush out. I have no control over them.

"You turn everything to shit," I scream. "You stink up the world with your ridiculous idea of masculinity. Swagger like a tough guy but run away at the first sign of trouble. Jean-Louis would still be alive now if you had the guts to admit to yourself who you are."

Somehow, Simon manages to collect his strength and spring at me, connecting with a hard right that splits my lip and sends me reeling back onto the bed. He lunges at me and I kick out wildly, smashing him in the jaw.

"I think you broke my jaw," he moans. As he staggers back, I hit him in the Adam's Apple again.

He collapses on the floor, writhing in pain and breathing rapidly. I sit on top of him, grab his hands and stretch them out.

"Admit you're a fifi, Jay Jay," I yell.

He tries to wiggle free and I hit him in the stomach. He hits me in the shoulder with a weak left and I hit him in the stomach again. Then I start hitting him wildly – in the stomach, on the shoulders, in the face.

"You're a murderer, Jay Jay," I scream. "You deserve to die. You deserve to die."

I can't stop hitting him. I can't think of anything but revenge.

"You don't deserve to live," I yell. "You're a monster. You don't deserve to be on this earth."

Simon is thin and wiry and he tries to wiggle out from under me. I grab his hands, get up and sit down on him hard, knocking the wind out of him again. I keep punching. Simon gets in some good punches, too. I feel my cheek sting during the rain of blows.

We fight until we're both nearly exhausted. I heard a pounding on my door. "Willie, don't kill him. Don't kill him, Willie. He's not Jay Jay."

I get up and open the door, my head spinning. Gina is there with Dave, the mountain man from the floor below. They stand between Simon and me.

"I finally had it out with him," I say.

"Well come upstairs and I'll clean you up. Your father's on the phone."

"My father's on the phone?"

"Yes, he said he tried to call you, but the line was off the hook."

"Must have knocked it off while we were fighting. I'll call him back."

"No, he's calling from a hospital. He's waiting on the line upstairs."

I'm so dazed I can't focus on what she's saying, but as I start to leave, I tell Dave, "Throw the bum down the stairs." Simon tries to maneuver around Dave so he can hit me. But before he can, I punch him squarely in the nose, the blood spurting.

Dave grabs Simon by the jacket and is leading him out the door when I notice my splintered guitar on the floor. "Wait! You owe me \$23 for the guitar."

"Go fuck yourself!"

"Go fuck yourself. Okay, I'll just call the pater."

I find the phone and start to dial Simon's number in Montreal. I pretend I'm talking to his mother. "Hello, mater. I'll like to leave a message for the pater. Your son has knocked up a girl."

"Okay, okay, here's your lousy money," he snarls, handing over some tens.

“Damn, I really liked that guitar, crappy sound and all,” I say as Gina leads me up the stairs, my lip throbbing and my face lumpy with bruises.

Suddenly, my fuzzy brain makes the connection.

“Why is my father calling from a hospital?”

“I think your mother had a heart attack,” she says, taking my hands and looking at me in the sympathetically.

“Is it serious?”

“Sounds serious. You’ll know in a moment. Come on, hurry,” she says, dragging me up the stairs.

“I have some bad news for you,” my father says when I pick up the phone upstairs.” Your mother has suffered a heart attack.”

“How serious is it?” I ask.

“Very serious.”

“Will she be all right?”

“They’re still doing tests.”

As I’m talking, Gina is wiping my face with an alcohol swab to clean up the blood, making me wince.

“Tell me what happened,” I say.

“She collapsed in the living room and I called an ambulance and they rushed her to the Royal Vic. They did some tests and they’re going to give her a pacemaker tomorrow. You’d better come up here as fast as you can.”

I’m not convinced he’s telling me all he knows, so I press him.

“It’s a real heart attack? Because when I was leaving for New York, she said she was having a heart attack, but she miraculously recovered when I started to call 911.”

“You can’t blame her for that,” he says. “She was frightened. She had a pain in her chest. She didn’t know what was wrong.”

“By the way, how did you get this number?” I ask.

“I called information and they checked for a woman named Gina in the building. Solly gave us the name. You must have introduced her to Simon.” *That’s right I did. I remember.*

“I called your apartment but all I got was a busy signal,” he continues. “The operator said the phone was off the hook.”

“I guess I accidentally knocked it off,” not mentioning it happened while I was fighting with their spy, Simon.

When I hang up, Gina says, “I’m so sorry,” daubing my face one more time.

“Yeah, just when things were going well,” I say, downcast. I’m stunned. I can feel my heart racing. The color has drained from my face.

“Do you think it’s the real thing?” she asks.

“I guess so. Why else would she be in the hospital? She’s complained about palpitations for years.”

“I feel bad for you.”

“I better go and pack. I hope this doesn’t mean the end of my living in New York.”

I catch an Air Canada flight to Dorval Airport the next morning and arrive at the Royal Victoria Hospital, on the hill above the McGill campus, about 1 p.m. I know my way around because the hospital is where Jean-Louis recovered from his suicide attempt. My mother, looking the picture of misery, is lying in bed in her room, which she shares with a man

with a croupy cough. Her grey hair is stringy and uncombed. She looks bitter and angry, like she is about to cry. The lines in her face are more noticeable and her nose looks even longer. There's an IV tube in her left arm.

"It's so good to see you," she says in a hoarse voice, sounding like I've just returned from climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. "We've missed you so much."

I kiss her on the forehead.

My father stands about morosely with his head down.

I struggle for something to say.

Finally, "Are you in much pain?"

"It hurts where they made the incision. Other than that I'm all right," she says. "I'm weak."

"Tell me what happened."

"I had been having palpitations all day and then in the afternoon, they started getting worse. There would be nothing, then there would be a big boom, like something was hitting me in the heart. Nothing. Boom. Nothing. Boom. It happened three times and then I blacked out."

"Was it very painful?"

"That isn't something we need to discuss now," she says bitterly.

She closes her eyes and dozes. My father reads the Gazette, the morning paper. He has the look of a beaten man. From time to time he glances at me with the look of someone who is very put out, as if I was responsible for my mother's heart condition.

The tension is palpable. I say nothing.

After about an hour, she wakes up.

"So how long are planning to be with us?" she says.

“I don’t know. It depends on how long you’re going to be in the hospital.”

“It would be good if you could take off next week. That way your father could go back to work.”

“It would be hard for me to be away from school that long. I have some papers to write and finals to prepare for.”

She begins to cry, tears streaming down her lined face.

“I miss you so much. I wish you would come to your senses and come home.”

I miss you, too, I think. Even though you stick to me like flypaper and nag me to death about everything under the sun, I still love you.

“Lots of kids go away for college,” I say. “How is this any different?”

“Someone put an idea in your head.” *That must be Simon. I’m too much of a sheep to think of it myself. Baaa.*

“I’m ready to go down and close up the apartment for you,” my father pipes up.

“What’s the point of that,” I say.

“You won’t have to go back there.”

“Look, we agreed I could go to school there for a year.”

“Let’s not fight. Tell us about your lovely girlfriend. Your father said she sounded very nice on the phone.”

“She’s not my girlfriend. She lives upstairs. I babysit for her daughter. I explained that to you when you came down. She’s nine years older than I am.”

“Well, who is your girlfriend?”

“I don’t have one anymore,” I lie. “She went to Louisiana to be with some guy. It’s like Holly Golightly going to Brazil.” *The less they know the better.*

I can see neither of them have the slightest idea what I'm talking about, so I let it go.

At four o'clock, the cardiologist comes in. He is a tall, thin man with a thin face, short brown hair and a long, thin nose."

My mother, with the biggest of smiles on her face, introduces me as a budding doctor, saying I'm a pre-med."

"Oh, NYU," he says with a doctor's smile. "I did graduate work at Columbia."

He takes her pulse and listens to her heart.

"She's doing fine. These new pacemakers are remarkable. They have these new mercury batteries that make them small and easily tolerated by patients. I think she'll be ready to go home in a week."

"Oh no, doctor. I'm not strong enough. I'll need to be here for two weeks at least."

"Well, we'll see," the doctor says. He smiles and leaves.

I follow him outside and ask about the heart attack.

"How severe was it?"

"We're still doing tests. We'll have the results in a few days." He pauses. "I'll make sure to keep your father up to date. Now, I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me. I have other patients."

Is that good or bad? I guess I'll find out eventually.

When visiting hours end, my father and I go to a coffee shop for dinner instead of cooking at home – neither of us is much of a cook. The special is chicken and you get soup or a salad and a choice of jello or rice pudding for dessert. What about that fabulous French cooking in Montreal. I have the rice pudding and he has the jello. Both of us are dead tired, but he rejects taking a cab.

“The bus is right here,” he says and stands by the bus stop. The bus finally comes and it takes 20 minutes to get home, a 10-minute cab ride at the most.

And then I’m in my room again, with its white walls, sloping ceiling and incredibly uncomfortable sofa. In the backyard, I can see my friend the lilac tree, adopted home of some neighbor’s black and white cat. The lights are on in the houses facing ours and I can see people moving from one room to another. It’s nice, but there is no mirror over the desk to reflect the quirky buildings in Greenwich Village and the orange-crimson sun.

The phone rings and I rush downstairs to answer it. It’s Gina.

“How did things go?”

“It went okay. She made a teary-eyed appeal for me to come home, but other than that, she didn’t nag me too much.”

“How serious was her heart attack.”

“I don’t know. I asked the doctor, but he said he doesn’t know yet.”

“Do you believe him?”

“No, but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“How’s Charlie?”

“She has a new cold.”

“Maybe you should take her to the doctor.”

“I will, if she doesn’t get better in a day.

“I miss her – and you, too.”

“I miss you, too, Willie.”

After the second day, my father and I agree to spell each other. He will come in the morning so he can put in an appearance at work afterward and I will come in the afternoon. The next morning, I walk to Notre Dame High School and stand outside, closing my eyes for a second.

“What do you think you’re doing?” a voice shouts at me.

I look up and there’s a short man in shiny black suit at a second-floor window -- Mr. Sexton, the bad assistant principal.

“It’s Willie Goldstein, Mr. Sexton. I used to go here.”

“Goldstein? I don’t know any Goldstein? You’re on school property. Get out of here or I’ll call the police.”

“I’m standing on the sidewalk, Mr. Sexton. The sidewalk isn’t school property.”

“It certainly is. Why don’t we let the police decide.”

“Why don’t we,” I say and start walking away.

I’m a good 50 feet away when I hear somebody yelling, “Willie, Willie, wait up.”

It’s Mr. Doyle, the good assistant principal.

“It’s Doyle, John Doyle,” he says, when he catches up to me. “Don’t mind him, he’s just an old sourpuss.”

“Yeah, that’s how I remember him. Is anything ever going to change here?”

“Actually, it has. You know, Jay Jay, he quit. He never came back after the Christmas holidays. Told people he was moving to Florida or going to open a bar.”

“He’s really gone?”

“Yep. Jean-Louis’ parents led a big campaign against him with the school board and got other parents to join in. I guess they figured it could happen to their kids.”

Wow, the fifti fighter hit the road. Who's going to take up the cudgel, now?"

He laughs and we talk for a few moments, me saying that I love living in Greenwich Village and going to NYU and I'm visiting because my mother is ill. Then we shake hands and I walk to the center of town, shaking my head.

When I get to the hospital, my mother starts in, saying I should come back and finish my education and then I can go back. What's the point of that? I ask.

"You'll know your mind better."

This makes no sense to me, as with most of my mother's arguments.

"If I come back, I'll lose the year."

"Bah," my mother says. "McGill isn't going to give you credit for courses you took at NYU. NYU isn't on the same level. It's just wasted effort."

My mother clearly isn't aware that from NYU's point of view, McGill probably isn't on its level.

"McGill said they would," I reply, "but first I have to pass my courses. If I come back I'll lose a year and then I'll be two years behind."

"You can make it up in the summer."

My mother clearly is a believer in the salesman theory of life: Repeat something over and over and you'll break down the customer's sales resistance.

"Mother, why do you always try to sell me something I don't want to buy," I say, getting exasperated.

"I'm not trying to sell you anything. I'm just trying to prevent you from wasting your future and spending your life as an idle dreamer."

Like you did such a good job with yours.

“Don’t get upset,” I say. “Think of your heart.”

I excuse myself, saying I need a cup of coffee, but instead of going to the cafeteria, I go to the waiting room for some peace and quiet. In the room are a Hasidic couple. The man has very long payes, sideburns curled as if they were curled by a curling iron. He is dressed mostly in black. He is wearing a round black hat with a very large round brim. A black coat extends below his knees, covering him and his white shirt and his tzitzis, a fringed garment that stretches below his waist. He doesn’t wear pants, but black shorts that fall below his knees. These are tucked into long black socks. He doesn’t wear shoes but black slippers. This is the first time I’ve seen a Hasid up close and it surprises and somewhat disgusts me. I feel totally disconnected from this man. I don’t feel he is a Jew, but someone from an alien planet. I stare at the payes, imagining the man must have spent hours curling them. The woman has kerchief over her hair, no makeup and a skirt down to her ankles. She looks very mannish. There is nothing sexual about her. Imagine having to sleep with her. And yet, the man must be able to find some way to get aroused because Hasidim have large families.

There doesn’t seem to be any connection between the man and woman. They don’t talk. They lean in opposite directions as they sit. My mother and father lean in opposite directions as they in the hospital room. They don’t talk much, though my father is very solicitous, repeatedly asking my mother if she wants something. I have a sudden flash of insight. The Hasidim could be my parents. They live a stylized life, a life where every move, every action is prescribed. My parents live a stylized life, except that wanting money replaces religion. If I come back, I will live the same life. I will probably enter some profession I have absolutely no interest in and live in some boring Jewish suburb.

I admit that returning to New York will be a wrench for both my parents and myself. My parents love me and I realize I love them even though they drive me crazy. But if I come back, I will never have the chance to live the life I want. I will never have what I have now -- Gina and Charlie and the joy of being with a fun-loving band of misfits. At the very least, I want to enjoy this longer.

I see the thin cardiologist walk past the waiting room and rush up to him. "Did my mother really have a heart attack," I ask.

The doctor hesitates. "I don't like to get caught in the middle of family disputes," he says. "Your father was supposed to discuss this with you."

"We he didn't and he's not here right now. And I have to make a decision about going back to New York," I say, improvising widely. "My girlfriend's in the hospital. She's very sick. They don't know what she has."

The doctor looks me in the eye, then sighs.

"Your mother didn't have a heart attack. A heart attack involves heart damage. The X-rays ruled that out. Your mother has a heart rhythm problem. Sometimes her heart beats rapidly, sometimes it beats slowly, sometimes it stops beating for a few seconds. That's what happened on Sunday. Her heart didn't beat and she fainted.

"The pacemaker will take care of that," he continues. "It steps in when her heart stops beating. It should add years to her life. It's really a simple operation. Most people go home in a day or two. But your mother feels she's not well enough to go home, so we're letting her stay for the moment.

"I hope I've answered your question. You'll find out all about this in medical school." He smiles his doctor's smile. "I've got to run."

There are two ways to get home from the hospital. You can walk down the hill and go right or you can walk down the hill and go left. Either way, you reach a bus stop. After I leave the hospital on the third night, I turn right. As I'm passing Mountain Street, I notice a sign for Le Bastille, a bar I always wanted to try, and decide to go in and have a beer.

Le Bastille's trademark is a huge zinc bar that is framed by a wall of beveled mirrors. There is noise and laughter and air is thick with the exotic smell of *Gitanes* cigarettes. The barmen and waiters wear white shirts and black aprons. In the back is a room where you can eat French food on tablecloths of newsprint. When you are finished, the waiter adds up the bill on the paper.

The place is very crowded and it takes me a while to get to the bar and order a Labatt 50, which everyone else seems to be drinking. On my right is a tall man with curly black hair falling over his forehead, two caterpillars for a mustache and an infectious grin. He is holding court for a number of pretty young things, both men and women. The girls are like butterflies. They flutter up to him as if he was a bush. He holds them in his gaze and then they fly off. A bartender says the man is Nick Auf der Maur, a reporter for *The Gazette* and a man about town. They let him drink for free because he brings in so many customers, mainly women. I try to join in but everyone ignores me, so I sit at the bar and drink my beer.

"Willie, is that you?" comes a voice.

I turn and there is a very attractive woman with dark eyes and wide red lips.

I don't immediately make the connection, so the woman says, "You're not talking to me?"

"Eliane," I suddenly realize. "I haven't seen you in such a long time. God, do you look pretty." We hug and give each other a kiss-kiss on the cheeks.

She looks me over. “You’re much handsomer now that you’re not wearing those old-fashioned glasses and your hair is longer.”

A man gets up to give her his seat and she sits down and orders a Perrier. I tell her I’m taking a break after visiting my mother in the hospital and she says she’s meeting a friend for dinner. “I can’t believe I’ve run into you like this,” I say, and we dance around each other for a bit. She sits quietly for a moment, then turns to me and says, “It’s a really fucked up situation, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I agree, nodding. I debate whether to tell her about Simon and finally decide she deserves to know. I say that Simon is involved with a man and wants her to have an abortion so he can leave with no strings attached. To my surprise, she says, “Yes, I know. I know all about it. We’ve discussed it.”

She becomes bitter. “I’m thinking of having the child and raising it myself,” she says. “Men are so fucked up. Does a woman really need a man other than to be a sperm donor? I’m thinking of going back to France and having my baby there. They have good programs for single mothers, much better than here.”

I tell her I can understand why she’s angry.

“You don’t know the whole story,” she says, her voice rising. “You just think Simon is spineless because he won’t admit he is gay, but it’s more complicated than that. He’s gay and he’s not gay. He loves the man in New York and he loves me. He loves women, he loves men. He doesn’t know which he loves more. It’s very confusing. He doesn’t know who he is. You are lucky because you know who you are. But he doesn’t. He really wanted to talk to you about this in New York, but he changed his mind when you were so hostile.”

“A real man has to take it as well as dish it out,” I say.

“Stop with those silly masculine games,” she says angrily.

“You know,” I say. “I did a lot of reading when I was trying to help Jean-Louis and it’s not that uncommon for men and women to love both sexes. “It’s not what we’re taught in high school, but many people aren’t exclusively heterosexual or homosexual.”

She looks in my eyes. “Even though I think men are donkeys, it’s getting harder and harder to be a man, what with the long hair and all,” she says. “Are you a man, are you a woman -- or are you both? The lines are getting blurred. For someone raised on the traditional idea of masculinity, this is very difficult.”

“I agree,” I say. “Simon always had a rigid idea of masculinity. It must be very hard for him now that he doesn’t fit that idea. But he’s going to have to accept it. The old order is changing. People are looking for new ways to live. It’s going to be very difficult for those who cling to the old ways.”

She takes my hand, turns her head to one side and says in a soft voice. “You’re a good listener. Thank you very much for listening. Sometimes, you just need someone to talk to.” I can’t help but notice her dark eyes and Ava Gardner mouth.

“Are you seeing someone?” she asks. I say I am, a woman who is nine years older than I am and has a six-year-old daughter. “I’m crazy about both of them.” I realize that this is the first time I’ve ever referred to Gina as my girlfriend.

I ask her how long she intends to stay with Simon?

“Just until we decide about the abortion,” she says. It’s finished with us. I’m not interested in a love triangle.”

Eliane says she doesn't think Simon explained the abortion properly. There's a Dr. Morgenfield, an abortion activist who's rumored to perform abortions. He even lives in the Town of Notre Dame.

He wouldn't talk to them, said they'd have to have a referral. But they couldn't find anyone to refer them.

"You're a reporter. Maybe you could call him. I'll bet he'll talk to you," she says.

"Eliane, if I call him as a reporter, he'll probably think I'm a cop and hang up." I reply.

Besides, I explain for the umpteenth time, I'm not a real reporter. I'm just a copy boy. I got sent out on a story and got lucky.

Doesn't the wire service have a bureau in Montreal? she asks. Maybe someone in the bureau knows the doctor and can call him. What I wouldn't do for Simon I will do for Eliane. I tell her I'll check and see. We exchange phone numbers.

Then she says something that surprises me. Even if Morganfield agrees to do it, she doesn't know if she'll go through with it.

"The Catholic Church says that the soul enters the embryo at the moment of conception," she says. "Even though I'm not devout, I find it hard to imagine killing a little human thing. What would you do?"

I tell her the Jewish religion says abortion is okay for the first three months. "I agree it's a very hard decision, but bringing an unwanted child into your life will cripple your life," I say.

"Simon isn't going to be a father."

She lowers her head and appears lost in thought. She says nothing.

Her friend arrives. Eliane introduces us and asks if I want to join them for dinner. I say I'm meeting my father. We kiss-kiss and I say it was lovely to see her.

As I'm walking to the bus stop, I think, *I don't know who I am any more than Simon or the man in the moon. It's just that I'm not afraid of finding the answer.*

That evening Gina calls.

“Charlie is asking for you,” she says.

“What's wrong?”

“Her cold is worse and she's running a fever. The doctor thinks she might have pneumonia. He's given her antibiotics, but he says that if she doesn't get better, he's going to put her in the hospital.”

“God, that's awful.”

“And she says she can't see the grey cat any more. She thinks the grey cat went with you to Montreal. She's still imagining she sees a grey cat.”

“Can I talk to her?”

“Okay, just for a minute.”

“Hello, sweetheart,” I say when Charlie gets on. “I'm sorry you're not feeling well.”

“Is the gray cat with you? I can't see her any more. Is she with you?”

“I don't know, dear. I haven't really been watching for her. But I'll come back tomorrow and we'll find her together.”

I'll take a plane in the morning, I tell Gina.

The next morning, I stop by the hospital on my way to the airport.

I explain that I'm leaving because Charlie is very sick.

“You're going back to that cesspool because some shiksa's daughter is very sick,” she fumes. “*I'm* very sick.”

“Ma, I spoke to the doctor and he told me you didn’t have a heart attack. You have an irregular heartbeat. You can go home whenever you want.”

“Doctors! What do they know?” she spits out. “I know what agony I’ve suffered. I know the pain I’ve endured.”

“You didn’t have to make up a story about having a heart attack,” I tell her gently. “I would have come to see you, anyway.”

Once I arrive in New York, I drop my bag in my apartment and rush upstairs to Gina’s. The door is opened by a man who’s wearing a raincoat, the stone-colored shapeless kind. He is tall and thin and his shoulders turn in. His cheeks slope in like an hourglass, giving him the look of being perpetually sad.

“I’m Harry,” he says.

Harry from Cleveland. At last!

“I’m Willie,” I say.

“Yes, Gina has told me about you,” he says. He looks like he’s about to cry.

If Harry’s here, Charlie must be really sick. I’m trying to think of a tactful way to ask what’s wrong when Charlie, who has been sitting on the couch while her mother spoon-feeds her tea, runs up and hugs me around the waist. I put my hand on her forehead. It’s quite warm.

“Oh Willie, Willie, it’s so good to have you back,” she says. “Did you bring the grey cat with you?”

“I did, dear. Take a good look and you’ll see her.”

“I’ve been trying, Willie, but she’s not here.”

“Grey cat? What are you talking about?” Harry asks indignantly.

“It’s just a game we play,” I say. “A child’s imagination.”

“It’s not a game,” Charlie pouts. “I can really see a cat walking beside me.”

She returns to the couch and her mother puts a blanket around her. Gina gives Charlie a pill and stands her up to take her into the bedroom.

“Hugs! Hugs!” she commands of me.

I hug her again and she says, “Thank you daddy.”

Harry of the perpetual sadness tries to hug her but she pulls away from him. He again looks like he’s going to cry.

“Dear, I’m not you’re father,” I say. “Harry’s your father.”

“No, he’s not, he’s not!” She starts to cry.

“He ran away . . . He abandoned us when he found out I had a hole in my heart.” She begins bawling, tears streaming her cheeks.

I freeze. I can’t believe what I’ve just heard.

“You have a hole in your heart?” I say dumbfounded.

“Yes,” she says through tears, looking terrified, as if someone is going to punish her.

I turn to Gina. “Is that why she gets tired. Is that why she’s sick?” I ask.

“Yes,” says a tearful Gina. “And because she’s a little girl, she blames herself for Harry’s leaving. That’s why she’s always trying to find a husband for me.”

“How could you not tell me? I’m her” I stop myself before saying it.

Gina doesn’t say anything.

“You know,” I suddenly remember, “the second time I took care of her, she told me she had a hole in her heart, but I misunderstood her. I thought she was talking about her father.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask again. “I could have hurt her with all the running around that we did.”

“You didn’t, she loved it.”

She looks at me, her face pained. “How could you tell someone that your daughter has a hole in her heart, that she might need an operation someday, that they might have to put her on the heart-lung machine, that she might . . .” She doesn’t finish. She puts her arms around me and breaks down crying.

After a moment, she wipes the tears from her eyes. “The doctors wanted to wait until she was older, when the surgery is less risky,” she says. “They also thought she might outgrow it. But that didn’t happen and she got worse, so they’re going to operate. They’re just waiting till she gets better.”

“Were you going to tell me about the operation?” I ask.

“Of course I was going to tell you,” she says angrily. “I dragged you back here, didn’t I?”

Charlie, tears still on her cheeks, grabs her mother’s arm and pulls her into the bedroom.

I stand there stunned, trying to absorb what I’ve just heard.

Finally I ask Harry, “Are you back for good?”

“No, not at all,” he says. “She called me and said if I was any kind of human being, I would come down here and be with my daughter now. I’m so sorry for what I did. I just couldn’t handle the situation. Married, no job, Gina having all the success and then a daughter with a hole in her heart. I couldn’t take it. I left. It was a terrible thing to do.

“I’m not brave. Gina’s the brave one,” he adds. “It took all of my effort to come down here.”

“Why don’t the two of you give it another try,” I suggest. “I’m not really her boyfriend. I’m just a friend.”

“Oh, no,” he says. “She doesn’t want me. She’s made that clear.”

Gina comes out of the bedroom. "I've finally put her down," she says. "She was really upset."

"I'm so sorry," Harry says. He hugs Gina. She hugs back for a moment, then pulls away. Harry excuses himself, says he should be getting back to his hotel, and leaves.

After he's gone, Gina confides, "The doctors think she might have an infection in her heart. They're going to wait and see if she gets better from the antibiotics. If she does, they'll do the operation. If she doesn't, they might do it anyway, but the risk is enormous."

She looks terrified.

I call Lou and tell him about Eliane's situation. He says he understands and will ask the Montreal bureau. A couple of hours later, I get a call from Joe Benoit, one of the reporters in the bureau. He says he knows Morgenfield because he's covered some of his abortion rallies. He spoke to Morgenfield, he says, and the doctor is willing to see Eliane but she should use his name when she calls. I thank him profusely and telephone Eliane, who is very grateful. "You're a good friend," she says. "Au revoir. I hope I see you again."

By the end of the week, Charlie's fever has subsided and the doctors schedule the operation for the following Friday, but there's a new hitch. Charlie refuses to do it unless Gina and I get married.

"Charlie, be reasonable," her mother says. "We can't get married on a moment's notice."

"Yes, you can," the little girl says, raising her voice as loud as she can. "You have to get married."

I get down on my knees, take her hands and gently ask why.

"If somethings happens to me, she won't be lonely," she says in a voice just above a whisper. "She's have someone to love her."

“Is that the reason you’ve tried to find her a husband?”

“Yes,” she says, nodding her head up and down.

Gina takes me aside. “Willie, we can’t get married – presuming you’d even want to – because I’m not divorced. Harry and I never made it final. We were always talking about getting back together.”

And then I do something that I will be known for later in life: I make a snap decision.

“We can get married in City Hall,” I say. “It shouldn’t be too hard to lie about being married and if the operation goes smoothly, I can fade off into the sunset in a few months.”

The next day, we leave Charlie with the babysitter and go down to the Marriage Bureau of the City Clerk’s office, where we pay a fee, show some identification and fill out a form. We leave blank the section that asks if you were married before. No one asks any questions and we wait around for what seems to be an eternity, we are rewarded with a marriage license. We take it home and show it to Charlie, who squeals.

The rules require us to wait for 24 hours. So the following day, Gina dressed in white, me in my only suit and Charlie in a fancy dress head down to City Hall. We collect Abe, who has agreed to act as the witness, take two guitars and buy a chocolate cake for the celebration afterward. In rapid succession, the familiar words are spoken: “Do you take . . .?” and “Do you take . . .?” and “. . . till death us do part” and we are man and wife (sort of). Charlie is overjoyed. We walk to the 120-year-old fountain in City Hall Park to celebrate. Gina straps on her guitar and Abe straps on his, a Dobro that a metal resonator on top to give it a loud, twangy sound. He straps it on so it’s parallel to the ground and runs a metal slide up the strings with his left hand. It sounds like Ba-oom. We sing “White Freightliner Blues:”

I’m goin’ out on the highway
Listen to them big trucks whine Ba-oom

I'm goin' out on the highway
Listen to them big trucks whine Ba-oom

White freight liner
Won't you steal away my mind? Ba-oom Ba-oom

When we're finished, I take Gina's guitar and sing my favorite song, "I'll Keep It With Mine," a little known Dylan tune:

I can't help it
If you might think I'm odd
If I say I'm not loving you for what you are
But for what you're not
Everybody will help you
Discover what you set out to find
But if I can save you any time
Come on, give it to me
I'll keep it with mine

I make everybody repeat the last line, smashing the chords on the guitar and stressing the first word:

I-I-I'll keep it with mine.

After that, we eat the cake, Charlie smushing it all over her face.

Early on Friday morning, Gina, Charlie, I and Harry present ourselves at St. Vincent's Hospital, where we are led down labyrinthine hallways to a surgical waiting room. Gina helps Charlie put on a green surgical gown and we wait until she is called for the operation. She doesn't say a word. She looks like a small, frightened animal.

The doctors explain she has an atrial septal defect, or ASD, a hole between the upper chambers of the heart. If left untreated, it could cause heart rhythm problems later in her life and increase the chances of a stroke. ASDs are revealed by the presence of heart murmurs, but they

aren't always picked up in early childhood. This is why Charlie was not diagnosed until she was three.

Finally, Charlie's name is called and she is led away, waving weakly.

The operation will take three hours. During that time, Charlie will be placed on the heart-lung machine so her heart can be stopped and the hole fixed. The machine was first used in 1953, when I was still in elementary school.

We settle down to wait, me sitting next to Gina, Harry sitting across from us.

It is noon. The operation might take longer than three hours or end sooner. Even though the doctor says the operation is routine, a thousand thoughts are racing around in my mind. They're putting someone I love – and a very little person at that – on a heart-lung machine and stopping her heart. What if the heart doesn't start beating again? I pray to God to protect Charlie as hard as can even though I'm not completely sure he's there. God and I have a unique relationship. I think he answers me, but he does it with a grumpy resignation after I knock on his door a lot.

Memories of Jean-Louis come flooding back. I was at his bedside the day he died. Except for the therapist, I haven't told anyone, including my parents. Jean-Louis had been in a coma for two weeks after his suicide attempt. I visited him regularly. I read newspaper articles to him and told him about things going on at school. They say that talking helps a coma patient regain consciousness. I think he recognized my presence. Once, I think I saw him smile. At the very least, my being there allowed his mother and father to take a break, go out and have a cup of coffee, smoke a cigarette.

On the day he died, Jean-Louis opened his eyes and smiled. Then, he said something that sounded like "goodbye" and closed his eyes forever. I haven't thought of this in quite a while

and it takes a huge effort to wipe it from my mind. Gina, I and Harry continue waiting. Each moment seems longer than the last. Gina leans against my shoulder and closes her eyes. We fall asleep leaning against each other.

A few minutes before 3, I wake up and I know the operation has ended. I wake Gina and say, “It’s over.”

“How do you know?”

“I just have this very strong feeling. I’ll see if I can get someone to check. I find a nurse and she calls the operating room. “Yes the operation is over,” she says. “The doctor will be out to talk to you.”

A few minutes later, the doctor, wearing a green surgical gown and a surgical hat, appears and says the operation was a success. Gina and I look at each other and burst into tears. In my mind’s eye, I see a figure who looks like Jean-Louis reach out to shake my hand. But when I look again, there’s no one there.

“In six months, she’ll be all healed and better than new,” the doctor says. “And since children get new skins every seven years, eventually there won’t be any trace of the scar.”

The doctor says we can see Charlie for a few minutes and a nurse leads us into the recovery room. The nurse wakes the little girl, who is dozing, saying, “Here is your mother.”

Gina gives her daughter a big kiss and stands back looking at her. “And here is your daddy,” she says, pointing to me. Harry, standing quietly to the side, is hurling daggers at her.

“Willie,” she says groggily, “I had a dream you were playing your guitar.” She smiles. “Are you still going to move in with us?”

Gina and I look at each other briefly. “Yes,” I say. What’s the harm?

As we're leaving, Charlie says, "Willie, you brought the grey cat back. I can see the grey cat." And as I stand there, I think I see the cat run over to the bed, jump up and curl up beside Charlie.

"What do we do now?" Gina asks as we're walking down the corridor.

- "I'll bring up a shirt."

SIX MONTHS LATER

It is a warm and languid October day six months after the operation. Charlie has been declared healed. Her doctor has found no trace of the murmur that led to the discovery of the hole in the heart. ("Do you want to see my scar?" Charlie often asks complete strangers, eliciting bewilderment from the strangers and giggles from Charlie. I have to tell her to stop.)

To mark the occasion, I have taken Charlie and Gina to a park underneath the Brooklyn Bridge that has a wonderful carousel – prancing white horses with flaring nostrils, quiet elephants, tall giraffes. Riders get little sticks that they use to capture brass rings. There is much squealing and cheering. Those who get brass rings get free rides.

I found the carousel on my travels around the city for WWF and was sure it would be a big hit with Charlie. But when we get there, we are greeted by a sign saying, "Closed for Repairs." This doesn't stop Charlie. If the machine won't take her round and round, she'll do it herself. So off she goes, running around the carousel at top speed, with Gina and I close behind. After circling the mechanical horses several times, we collapse on the grass laughing, exhausted.

I stare up at the sky, a pearl blue with a haze of clouds. As I look back, I realize that I've had a year of incredible intensity. Had I stayed in Montreal, I could have lived my whole life without experiencing such intensity. Not even 22, I have a wife, a daughter and a career. I work

at WWW two days a week and it's so much more fun than school that I have a hard time showing up for class even though I've switched my major to English.

I love the misfits who populate WWW and I certainly am one of them. This is my profession: misfit. I chose it by accident, but it fits. And our numbers are growing. As much as there are conservatives who cling to stifling middle-class values, there is a growing underground of misfits who want to be anything but middle-class.

I don't live at Gina's full time. Sometimes, I go downstairs so I can take a breather from being an adult. But Charlie doesn't seem to care as long as I'm around enough for her to pretend I'm living there. Gina and I are talking about getting the studio apartment on the fourth floor and combining it with her place to make a very big apartment. But that would take money and we don't have any. I told Gina that if she wanted to find someone her old age, I would understand, but she took my hand and said, "Willie, you will always be my husband."

As we're lying on the grass, I ask her why she thinks Charlie chose me to be her daddy.

"Because you see the grey cat," she replies.

"I don't really," I say. "I just pretend to so I won't hurt her feelings."

"You *do*, Willie. You *do* see the cat. You have an imagination. You believe there's a spirit that runs through everything."

Charlie has recovered her strength and gets up and starts running around the carousel.

"Again!" she motions to us, her eyes dancing. "Again!"

CODA

Holly married a millionaire. She and her husband bought a townhouse on East 92nd Street off Fifth Avenue, an apartment on the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois in Paris and a flat on Cadogan

Square in London. Willie's father died of a heart attack, but his mother lived to a ripe old age despite her many ailments. Willie heard a vague rumor that Eliane did not have an abortion but returned to Paris to have her baby. But he was never able to pin this down. Of Simon, he heard nothing. What he really hoped to hear was that Simon was hit by a truck, but of course that never happened.

Willie never returned to Montreal. He never went to med school. In fact, he never even graduated from NYU. He dropped out after his second year to take a full-time job at the Worldwide Wire Service. He told himself it would give him experiences he could use in his writing. But in fact, it was far more exciting to be a reporter roaming the city than to sit in a library combing through tedious texts of literary criticism for ideas to plug into torpid term papers. After a year on the local desk, he transferred to the foreign desk and a year later -- in part because they were willing to accept the shitty pay -- he and Gina were sent to Paris, Willie as a reporter since he spoke some French and Gina as an editor. They lived in a fifth-floor walkup on the Rue Jacob, three blocks from the Seine in the fashionable Sixth Arrondissement. They had no money. They ate in a different restaurant every night. Life was wonderful. After dinner, they would walk down the Rue de Seine or the Rue Mazarine to the Pont des Arts, the footbridge across the Seine, where they could see the lights of the city coming on and watch the bateaux mouches plow through the river. Charlie christened the Pont des Arts the Man-Woman Bridge after she saw a man in a dress sitting on one of the benches.

Willie and Gina were married for real in a special ceremony on the bridge one spring day, Gina in a white dress with a veil and Willie in his one suit, his hair now down to his shoulders. They stood in the center of the bridge, with their backs to the Isle de la Cite, where the towers of the Notre Dame Cathedral poked out from above the buildings. In front of them, in the distance,

stood the glimmering Eiffel Tower. Charlie ran back and forth, flitting between them like a butterfly.