

## THE GREEN CAKE

**M**Y SISTER, my mother and I sat in a row on the front stoop of 238 North Pearl Street, feeling overwhelmed and diminished by the unfamiliar bustle of the big city. Beside the stoop was a stack of twine-bound cardboard boxes bulging with bedding, clothing and kitchen things. Around them were clustered our few scraps of furniture looking scuffed and shabby in the unforgiving glare of daylight. It was Saint Patrick's Day, and the mid-March sun felt good, but chill winter air still lurked in the shadows. The year was 1936; I was six years old, my sister was three, my mother was twenty-seven, and we were beginning a new life.

We had been sitting on that stoop long enough for the gritty brownstone to mottle the backs of my legs between my short pants and my knee-high stockings. My sister wore a starched, frilly dress that Mother had bought out of money meant to tide us over until we got on our feet because she wanted Anne-Marie to look pretty the first time her father saw her, but the dress had got crushed during the long drive

with the three of us crammed into half of the front seat of my uncle's rattletrap of a truck. And now we sat hip to hip on that step, Mother in the middle, my sister and I drawing comfort from contact with her, while she drew maternal strength and determination from contact with us. Anne-Marie was hungry and sleepy and close to tears. Taking her onto her lap, Mother looked anxiously up and down the street for my father whom she hadn't seen for four years, not since the morning he went out to look for work and didn't come back, leaving her with a toddler, a baby, and two dollars and some change in her purse.

She didn't hear from him again until a letter arrived just three days earlier saying how sorry he was for running away from the family he loved, the family he had worried about every single minute since he left. There was no excuse for behaving like that, he admitted, but he just couldn't stand being made to feel he wasn't man enough to support his own wife and children. He had been sure that her family would give us a hand once he was out of the picture. He knew that Mother's father considered him to be little better than a flashy hustler and a con man—exactly what he was, in fact. The letter said that he had found a job and an apartment in Albany. Not much of a job and not much of an apartment, but it would be a start, and he had something big in the works. That letter had come in the nick of time, because the owner of Lake George Village's only all-year restaurant had just told my mother that he wouldn't be needing her as a waitress when the tourist season began. Her frequent absences during that winter when she was sick with lung trouble had shown him that she was unreliable, and he had decided to replace her.

During the whole trip down to Albany, my uncle had grumbled about the time and money this was costing him, and when we didn't find my father waiting at the address he had given us, my uncle just unloaded our stuff in grumpy haste and left us there, saying that he had to make it back before nightfall because he didn't trust the headlights of his old truck. He was in such a hurry to get away that he drove off without shutting the passenger-side door, which flopped open. As he reached over to shut it he stepped on his brakes, causing the door to pinch his hand. He roared a curse as he furiously stomped on the gas to get the hell away from that goddamn hole of a goddamn slum, but the truck stalled and a car behind him sounded its irritated horn, so he

shouted at the driver to go to hell and started up again, and he drove off pounding his good fist on the steering wheel, glad to see the end of his wife's goddamned freeloading cousin and her goddamned brats!

Mother and I exchanged glances and couldn't help smiling.

My father's letter had said that we should wait for him on the steps of the building because he was planning a big surprise for us, but now Mother was tired of sitting there with people peering at us from windows and stoops all around. She rose to go inside and look for him, but I grabbed her wrist. Like most kids, I loved surprises, and I didn't want her to ruin this one. Let's wait just a little while longer.

A couple of boys detached themselves from a knot of kids and sauntered past our stoop, disdainfully eyeing our cardboard boxes and our shoddy furniture, then letting their sassy eyes slide over me. I knew that my short pants and knee socks made me an object of scorn to these two boys dressed in knickers. From school I was familiar with those universal rituals among boys when they puppy-sniff one another for the first time, measuring and hefting for rank and dominance. I could tell that the smaller of the two boys, a big-eared kid about a year older than I, was wondering if this skinny new kid would turn out to be a regular guy or a sissy, if I would fight my way out of school-yard challenges or run to the teachers. I kept my eyes on him as he strolled by, but I held him in a soft, tired look. To look hard-eyed would be to send a challenge; to avoid his eyes would be to submit. Boys are born with this canine pack-hunter's instinct for caste and nipping order. After the kids had passed, one of them crossed the street and spoke to a flat-faced, boneless woman sitting on her stoop, obviously his mother, and I could see she was asking him about us, especially about my mother, who wasn't anything like the faded, marshmallow mothers of other kids. My mother was young and slim and had short bobbed hair; she could dance and run and play games, and she wore slacks in an era when few women did. I don't know what the kid said, but his mother sniffed in a way that was both competitive and dismissive. I was used to that sort of reaction to my mother, but still sensitive about it. It wasn't that I wanted her to be the same as other mothers. I was proud of her youthful good looks and her feisty independence, but I sometimes wished she could be different in a less obvious way because it's hard having a mother who's different.

Some bigger boys, fourteen or fifteen years old, loitered in front of a cornerstore diagonally across the street from our stoop. Fully aware of the gaggle of girls who admired them from two stoops away and whom they ostentatiously ignored, the boys talked loudly, pushed one another in gruff play, snorted out forced laughs and repeatedly glanced at their reflections in the cornerstore window with satisfaction, although now and then one of them felt obliged to hook a comb out from his back pocket and drag it through his Brylcreem'd hair, then press the sides into place with a caressing palm. They played an endless round-robin of that finger game in which paper covers rock, rock smashes scissors and scissors cut paper, known by different names in various parts of the country, but called 'Rochambeau' in the urban Northeast by generations of kids who had no idea that a French general who had helped our infant republic defeat the British at Yorktown had been immortalized in a child's game, much less how to spell the chanted sound as they threw their fingers out on the '-bow!' of the third syllable. The loser of Rochambeau had to let the winner 'knuckle' him, hit him on the top of the head as hard as he wanted to with the knuckle of his middle finger. The one who got knuckled would snort disdainfully although the pain sometimes dampened his eyes with fugitive tears, which he quickly blinked away as he rearranged his hair in the store window. Two of the boys were smoking, the biggest one, who was the leader, and a small ugly one who played the role of flunky and clown. They smoked like kids new to smoking do, trying to appear supremely casual, but fussily examining the burning ends of their cigarettes with grave frowns and tapping off the ash more frequently than it could gather. These older boys wore long trousers and were bare-headed, while the younger boys of the block were in knickerbockers and caps. Only very young boys wore short pants. Except for me, of course! The principal bane of my life was my mother's need to dress my sister and me better than other kids, in compensation, I suppose, for our lack of a father and a secure breadwinner. Because she couldn't afford new clothes, the hand-me-downs my sister and I wore were always cleaner and more freshly ironed than those of our playmates, yet another of those differences that kids will not endure.

The strange new sounds and gestures of life and play that I observed with a mixture of fascination and malaise from our stoop that

first afternoon would, in the course of the eight and a half years I was to live on North Pearl Street, become the unremarkable and unremarked ambience of 'my block' with its noise, its squalor, its childhood rites and ordeals, the awkward rutting rituals of its adolescents, and its shoals of dirty brats with runny noses, nits and impetigo playing their screaming games of kick-the-can or stick ball, sassing icemen and pushcart vendors, blocking traffic and exchanging insults with truck drivers who wanted to get through.

On that first day, the game of stick ball in the middle of the street broke up when second base drove off. The preening boys in front of the cornerstore drifted away down Livingston Avenue toward the deserted warehouses between the freight yards and the river where, as I would learn by being one of them, they would snoop around the dripping, echoey, broken-glass-crunchy-under-foot, piss-smelling vastnesses of abandoned buildings, and they would chuck stones at the few window panes that remained tauntingly intact. North Pearl Street was a typical slum of the first half of what would be called the American Century. These slum blocks were identical in their essence and social effects, varying only in the cultural decoration of their ethnic concentrations. Pearl Street was Irish. More precisely, it was bog Irish.<sup>1</sup>

Pearl Street was the sort of place that appeared, laundered and tempered with humor and hokey sentimentality, in films starring the Dead End Kids: sassy-mouthed but essentially good boys who only needed one of Hollywood's grittier stars to sort them out and make honest, hard-working citizens of them. But the violent, reality-calloused kids of North Pearl would have scoffed at the efforts of a tough (but warm-hearted) Father Pat O'Brien or a wryly knowing Father Spencer Tracy to 'save' them by opening a boys' club and showing them that priests could be reg'lar fellas.

While we were sitting on the stoop anticipating the surprise my father had prepared for us, a thin layer of milky cloud began to spread over the sky, and the chill of a March afternoon settled on us. I was ready to give in and suggest that we go inside to look for my father, when the front door of a building across the street flew open, banging

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<sup>1</sup>This tale is complete without footnotes, but there are also social, historical, political and personal observations available to you. You can download these cybernotes from [www.trevanian.com](http://www.trevanian.com), or have a friend download them for you. Cybernote 1 will deal with 'bog Irish'.

against the brick wall, and out poured a yelping, shrieking pack of children belonging to what we would come to know as the Meehans: a wild, drunken, dim-witted tribe that inhabited three contiguous houses on the east side of the street. All the Meehans were related in complex and unnatural ways. The four old Meehans, two brothers and two sisters, had produced half a dozen loud, dirty, boozy Meehan adults; and random, transient matings between and among this second generation of brothers/sisters/cousins and their parents had spawned some twenty offspring, who combined among themselves and with the earlier generations to produce a scattering of son/nephew/uncle/cousin/grandsons and daughter/niece/aunt/cousin/granddaughters. While all the Meehans had earned their family name at least twice over, only one of them was called 'Mrs Meehan'. The rest were known by their full names: Old Joe Meehan, the tribal chief, Young Joe Meehan, the heir apparent, Patrick Meehan, the dangerous one, Maeve Meehan, the nasty one, or Brigid Meehan, the willing one.

Ironically, the one called 'Mrs Meehan' on the block was the only woman of that tribe who was not related to the rest of the adults by blood. One of the Meehan men had been put into an institution for the dim-witted for a while, and he returned with a woman he had found there. It was she who did most of the tribe's cooking, cared for the younger children, and did such cleaning as took place in their warren...mostly scattering the litter around by batting at it with a ratty broom.

This 'Mrs Meehan' was the epicenter of the consternation and wailing that erupted through their front door and poured down the stoop. She was clutching a smoking iron skillet, and the kids surrounding her were sobbing and screaming, 'Drop it, Ma! Drop it!' Her face was twisted in agony because the skillet handle was burning her hand, but still she clung to it, whimpering. A Meehan male appeared at the top of the stoop wearing a sweat-stained undershirt, beer bottle in fist. He shouted at 'Mrs Meehan' to put the goddamned skillet down, for the love of Jesus! What did she think she was playing at, there?

"Help me!" she beseeched, the pain causing her to bare her teeth. But he only sniffed and shook his head. "Crazy bitch."

A tousled female opened the front window of the next Meehan

house and thrust out her inflamed face, a cigarette glued to her lower lip. "What the hell?"

"It's only herself," the man informed his sister/cousin/mate in a tone of weary exasperation. "Up to her old tricks, she is."

The woman shrugged and closed the window.

One of the children tried to wrench the skillet out of his mother's hand, but he yelped and sucked at his burnt fingers. Just as my mother took Anne-Marie off her lap and was rising to dash across the street to help the poor woman, Old Joe Meehan, the doyen of the clan, appeared at the doorway. His sunken cheeks were white-stubbled and he had obviously just pulled on his tatty low-croched trousers because the flies were agape and he was still thumbing his suspenders up over his bare chest and tufted shoulders. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" he complained as he swatted his way through the swarm of kids. With one skillful gesture born of practice, he kicked the skillet out of Mrs Meehan's hand, and she screamed as some of her skin went with it. Clutching her wrist as though to pinch off the pain and keep it from rising up her arm, Mrs Meehan docilely followed him up the stoop. Two of the kids kept watch over the still-hot skillet so that no one would steal it before another kid had returned from inside with a wad of rags to wrap around the handle so they could bring it back in, followed by the rest of the runny-nosed Meehan flock, all chattering and laughing now that the crisis was past. And suddenly the street returned to normal, and the rumble and clatter of the city around us re-emerged.

My sister and I exchanged big-eyed looks. What kind of place *was* this? What kind of people?

This was my first encounter with one of the crazy ladies of Pearl Street, some of whom were not really crazy at all, just eccentric or 'different', although a couple were crazy by anyone's criteria. Over the ensuing years, my dealings with these crazy ladies would punctuate the lurching, uneven stages of my growth and self-awareness.

We had been sitting on the stoop for over an hour, expecting my father to come walking around the corner at any minute. When a man did approach, Anne-Marie and I looked up at our mother to read her reaction, because neither of us would have recognized him. But none of them was our father. The March air was cooling rapidly, and Anne-Marie in her thin party dress was rubbing her upper arms

to warm them, so my mother rose and looked up and down the street one final time before saying, "Well, we can't sit here until the cows freeze over! I'm going to take a gander inside. Maybe Ray told someone where he was going and how long he'd be. You kids keep an eye on our stuff." And she went up the stairs and into the red brick tenement.

She came back with an envelope she had found stuck into the crack of the door of apartment 2 on the first floor. Number 238 had no apartment 1, a designation the mail carriers reserved for basement apartments that looked through the iron bars of their low windows into wells sunken below the level of the sidewalk. But the brick row of seven identical five-story buildings that included 238 had only half-basements across the front, and that space was occupied by coal bunkers, huge old iron furnaces and boilers in varying states of dilapidation. Mother sat down between us and opened the envelope to find a note and a big old-fashioned key with a bow of green crepe paper tied around it. The note was from my father; it said that he had gone out to find a bakery that had a green cake for the party and he'd be back in a jiffy. A party? Green cake? Anne-Marie and I exchanged eager glances.

"Well, we might as well get ourselves moved in," Mother said.

Leaving Anne-Marie to watch over our things, Mother and I struggled up the stairs carrying her old Saratoga trunk with its scuffed leather bindings. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the kids across the street watching me stagger under the weight of the trunk. I'd have given anything to be able to hook one finger in the leather handle and lift it...just like that!...whistling to myself, maybe. Yes, and carrying something huge in my other hand! That would have been great!

I have always been particularly sensitive to smells, even squeamish, and when I stepped into that hall I drew my first breath of that medley of mildew, Lysol, ancient grease, rotting woodwork, sweat, rat droppings, coal dust, baby urine and boiled cabbage...the residue of a hundred and fifty years of poverty and hopelessness, damp and eternal in the nostrils.

My mother and I staggered across the threshold of apartment 2, my arms feeling drawn out of their sockets by the weight of the

Saratoga trunk we had dragged and scooted down the hallway's scuffed and scruffy linoleum. We went into the kitchen to get a drink of water and were greeted by a vision. Obviously, the celebration my father planned was to be a Saint Patrick's Day party, and he had pasted strips of green crepe paper ribbon into chain links that he had looped back and forth between overhead water pipes. He must have spent hours doing it. On the narrow kitchen table there were four green paper plates with shamrocks, and standing in the middle of the table was a big bottle of green soda, presumably lime.

After drinking water directly from the faucet and getting our fronts wet in the process, Mother and I returned for more boxes and pieces of furniture. When we stepped back out onto our stoop Anne-Marie was standing in front of our boxes and furniture, her eyes shining with unwept tears of fear as she bravely interposed her little body between our possessions and the kids who had gathered to watch us move in. People had come out onto the stoops on both sides of our building and across the street, where they sat, the men sucking at quart bottles of ale, the women observing and frankly evaluating our efforts and our possessions. I would learn that watching people move in and out was a traditional community entertainment on North Pearl Street, not only because it offered an opportunity to see things that were usually hidden away in apartments, but also for the tantalizing narrative conjectures the event spawned. For those moving in, there were questions of where they had come from. What misfortune—or, better yet, disgrace—had brought them to North Pearl? What sort of people would they turn out to be? (The gossips of Pearl Street deplored two kinds of women, those who were 'loose' and those who were 'snooty', the one being every bit as objectionable as the other.) For those moving out, the suppositions were more dire and the gossip more juicy. Oh, a move away from Pearl Street *might* result from a bit of remarkable luck, like getting a job in some other town, or marrying a man with a job, but more commonly it was a final family dispersal caused by someone dying, or being sent to prison, or by losing their child-support benefits, and the family, no longer able to sustain itself as a whole even in such a last-ditch place as Pearl Street, had been evicted by the slum landlord. Where could they go? How could they live? Would they ever be seen again? And what if

they had borrowed something from you? You'd better watch that they didn't take it with them.

Mortified to be the focus of this attention and conjecture, I worked hard to get us moved in quickly and away from their eyes and comments. To show the circle of kids that I was strong enough to take care of myself, I picked up things that were too heavy or too bulky for me to handle. To their sniggering amusement, I invariably had either an awkward struggle or a mortifying mishap in my effort to get whatever it was into the apartment, like when I finally managed to get a big box of mixed cleaning products to the top of the stoop, only to have the bottom fall out, leaving me holding the empty box while all kinds of stuff clattered back down the steps followed by a roll of toilet paper that unwound as it went, leaving a paper trail across the sidewalk and into the gutter. After chasing it down I had to re-roll it carefully, sure that all eyes were on me and that everybody was chuckling and snorting, but we couldn't afford just to waste it. In my rush to get this humiliating task over with quickly I got the paper on crooked several times and had to unroll it and start again.

While I fumbled in angry, unproductive haste I could see out of the corners of my eyes that the women were watching my mother lift big boxes and carry them with ease. She wasn't all that strong, but she was adroit. She was only a little over five feet tall, but she was wiry and she moved with the grace that had won her trophy cups for dancing the Charleston and the Varsity Drag when she was a seventeen-year-old flapper, only ten years before. I could tell that the women, mostly flaccid and dumpy with eating bad food, felt an immediate dislike for my mother's short page-boy hair, her bell-bottomed slacks, and her pert, even saucy, movement and gestures. "Probably both snooty *and* loose," their sniffs said.

Eventually we got all our boxes and bits into the apartment, which was rented 'semi-furnished', meaning there were four straight-backed wooden chairs each of a different design, color and epoch, two chiffoniers, one with drawers that stuck open, the other with drawers that stuck shut, a sagging double bed and a hand-made child's cot in the back bedroom, a narrow table in the kitchen, and in the front room an iron daybed and, incongruous in the limited space, two wicker chairs with broken spines that caused them to twist and squeak when you sat

in them and whose split canes scratched your legs and clutched at your clothes. But we were off the street and our possessions were no longer under the gaze of scoffers. Worn out with having done most of the work, Mother lay down on the daybed in the front room while Anne-Marie and I wandered through the apartment, looking into nooks and dark corners, imagining what our lives would be like in this strange new place. We flushed the toilet to see if it worked, and opened the tap in the old iron bathtub until the rust-brown water thinned to tan, then ran clear. (Apparently, the prior renters weren't great bath-takers.) We peeked into cupboards and the apartment's only closet. We opened the door of the lead-lined icebox and quickly closed it, gagging at the knee-buckling smell of a stale icebox. Being a big brother, I threatened to push her head in and make her breathe the stink; being a little sister, she threatened to tell our mother if I did, then I'd get it. She claimed the little child's cot in the corner of the bedroom; just right for her, because she too was little, and she would be close to Mother in the big bed, just in case someone had bad dreams and wanted to crawl in next to someone else.

As Anne-Marie looked on, her head through the railings in the back hall, I crept down the dark stairs to the basement from which a clammy, ominous chill rose to meet me. Being watched by my kid sister, I was obliged to go all the way down and even open the basement door a crack and peek in, but then I heard something—or thought I did—and I came dashing back up, shouting as I ran so it would seem as though I were trying to scare Anne-Marie, not that I was scared myself. But time and again, we found ourselves back in the kitchen, attracted to the looping festoons of green crepe paper and the Saint Patrick's Day paper plates and napkins and green soda for our party. We kept an ear cocked for our father's return with that green cake. A green cake!

Number 238 was at the center of seven identical brick row houses that had been built as private homes in the 1830s, when Pearl Street was a middle-class residential street that had the advantage of being close to the teeming commercial wharves where merchants did their business. To reflect the social aspirations of its original owners, the entrance halls of all seven houses were wide, so there was room for only three interconnecting rooms on the first floor, rooms that were used for

entertaining and impressing guests, so they were high ceiling'd, had ogee moldings and chandelier rosettes (but no longer any chandeliers), and the room giving onto the street had two tall windows. In most of the houses in our rows, these spacious first-floor rooms had been converted into three one-room studio flats with little kitchen nooks in the corner, a sofa that opened into a bed, and a shared bathroom at the end of the hall, just right for single old people who couldn't manage the stairs; but ours had been left as one apartment with a formal receiving room in front, giving on the street, a windowless middle room that had formerly been the dining room but now was more like a big hall and all-purpose storage space that you had to pass through to get to the other rooms, and a smaller back withdrawing room that had been partitioned into a bedroom and a small kitchen, with a door that gave onto a bathroom so narrow that the toilet, the tub and the washbasin were all in a row. The original kitchens had been in the basement, and all meals had been carried up to be served. The second floors of the seven identical houses had contained a withdrawing room ('drawing room'), a study or office, the master bedroom, and a generous dressing room cum lady's retiring room at the back of the building. These had been converted into two three-room apartments, each with a minute bathroom. Second-floor apartments were considered the best in any tenement and always cost more than others because they had biggish rooms and you only had to walk one flight up to get away from the noise, grime and threat of the street. Few on welfare ever lived on the second floor, which was reserved for 'a better class of people'. The third and fourth floors had originally been the family bedrooms, which had been converted into flats sharing an end-of-the-hall bathroom. Typical of Georgian fenestration, the windows were smaller the higher you went, so the fifth floor had the very small windows and the low ceilings of what had been servants' quarters. The cramped rooms on the fifth were the cheapest, not only because of the long climb up, but also because they were beneath the uninsulated flat roof and therefore were hot in summer and cold in winter. A bitter street joke said that people living on fifth floors had no right to complain about simmering all summer and freezing all winter because, in fact, the average yearly temperature up there was just about perfect.

The overall effect of our building, with its traces of erstwhile re-

finement in the intricate plasterwork now muffled beneath coats of ancient paint, was one of fallen gentility, of tawdry elegance. An old gentlewoman with her front teeth knocked out in a bar brawl.<sup>2</sup>

We thought ourselves lucky to have three big rooms, but we soon learned that first-floor flats were cheap because they were not considered desirable, in part because their windows were within reach of drunks and vandals leaning out from the stoop, so people could never sleep with them open, no matter how hot the weather got. Also, the rooms were awkwardly shaped because of the space lost to the big entrance hall and two flights of stairs, a broad one ascending to the second floor 'drawing room, and a dark narrow one down to the coal bunker and furnace in the basement. The front receiving room, however, with its high ceilings and ornate if paint-clogged plaster cornices had retained a certain forlorn grandeur, and here I was to sleep on the iron daybed for the next eight years, and here I listened to adventure programs on our Emerson radio, and here, late into the night, I knelt on a pillow at the big front window in the dark, and I daydreamed as I watched the street, when winter snow sifted down diagonally across the pane, or when plump drops of spring rain burst upon and wriggled down the glass, and sometimes in summer I would open the window (it was safe to open because it only came up about three inches before its warped frame jammed) and let the cool late-night air flow over my face as I listened to the melancholy sound of trains down in the freight yards that separated Pearl Street from the wharves and warehouses of the Hudson. In all seasons I was intrigued by late-night life on Pearl Street: sleepy lovers walking because they had no place to go, her head on his shoulder; befuddled drunks stepping off the curb with neck-snapping jolts, then looking back and swearing at the pavement for its duplicity; the rotating light of prowl cars grazing smears of red over the brick walls when the cops came to investigate a complaint or arrest someone...and sometimes the obscure wanderings of Pearl Street's crazy ladies.

Having investigated our new home, Anne-Marie and I were in the kitchen, looking at the bottle of green soda and thinking about that green cake. She sighed and said she was really, really, really hungry. Poor Anne-Marie. We hadn't eaten since breakfast, and food was more crucial to her sense of well-being than it was to mine or Mother's.

When she drank hot chocolate, she would look into the bottom of her cup and hum with pure pleasure, and she got light-headed and frightened when she was hungry; but she hadn't said a word because she didn't want to spoil the Saint Patrick's Day party by eating just before it started. I went into the front room and woke Mother to tell her we were hungry. She dug into her change purse in that tight-fingered way that meant she was almost out of money and clawed out a quarter, and she sent me across to the cornerstore to get a loaf of bread and a small jar of peanut butter. Mother believed that peanut butter offered the best food value per unit of money you could buy. Meanwhile, she would locate the box containing our kitchen things and unpack it.

"But don't mess up the kitchen," I reminded her. "We've got to keep everything ready for the party."

I crossed the street and passed, head down, through the knot of older kids that had returned to loiter in front of Mr Kane's cornerstore.

"Hey, kid! Where you from?"

I didn't answer. I had developed the tactic of pretending to be lost in my own thoughts to avoid having to deal with people.

"What's the matter, kid? Your ears broke? I asked where you was from."

He said 'axed' for 'asked'. I shrugged and reached out for the door to the shop, but a kid grabbed my collar and pulled me back, so I muttered, "Lake George Village."

"What's that? George what? Talk up, why don't you?" He said 'tack' for 'talk' and 'ya' for 'you', and that troubled me. These local tribes didn't even speak our language. It wouldn't be long, however, before I learned to slip into the metallic, dentalized, slack-mouthed idiom of Northeastern street talk when I wanted to sound tough, and save my own accent for when I wanted to seem intelligent or polite.

"We're from Lake George Village," I said more firmly than I felt.

"Where's that?"

"Up-state."

"Hey, kid, got any money?" another asked.

"No."

"Why you going to the Jew's then? He don't give kids no credit."

I tried to open the shop door, but someone grabbed my arm. "Come on, kid. Give us a nickel!"

"No!"

"You looking for a fist sandwich, kid?"

The door of the cornerstore opened. "Well, well, what have we here? A gathering of the neighborhood's best and brightest, is it? Our nation's hope for the future?" It was the shopkeeper wearing thick glasses and a green cloth apron. "And who are you, young man? Well, come in if you're coming in. I can't stand around here all day. Time is money, as the watchmaker said."

I followed him into the store, hoping the kids would disperse before I had to go back home.

In response to my request for a small jar of peanut butter, Mr Kane took up a long wooden pole with metal fingers that were manipulated from a grip in the handle. He grasped the jar of peanut butter on a high shelf of his narrow shop, plucked it away, then opened the metal fingers and let it drop. As I gasped, he snatched up the hem of his apron to make a nest for receiving the jar with a plop, the deft performance of a man who had show business in his blood. I would learn before long that only bad breaks and the Depression had brought Mr Kane to North Pearl Street as a shopkeeper. And it wasn't show business he had in his blood, it was socialism.

"And what else, young man?"

"A loaf of bread," I said. "...wait a minute. How much is the peanut butter?"

"For you? Fifteen cents. For others? A nickel and a dime."

"Okay, and how much is a loaf of bread?"

"Eleven cents. One thin dime and a somewhat thicker penny... which isn't logical, but who said life has to be logical?"

"Do you have small loaves?"

"Eleven cents *is* the small loaf."

"...Oh. I don't think I can..."

"Of course, day-old bread is only a nickel."

"Do you have any day-old bread?"

He looked down on me, his eyes huge through thick lenses. "Well, I close up shop pretty soon. Tell you what; I'll sell you a loaf of tomorrow's day-old bread. How's that?"

I hated people giving us stuff or doing us favors, as though we couldn't make our own way. I hated it because my mother resented it so much. But...

"Okay."

There was a shout outside as one boy 'sizzled' another by snapping his fingernails down across the kid's butt in a way that stings like hell. The sizzled kid took a swing at the other, who ran down the street, and a couple of kids ran after him, laughing and shouting. If I could only give them a little more time, maybe the rest of them would go away somewhere.

"We just moved in," I told Mr Kane brightly.

"Yes, I saw you sitting over on the stoop of 238, surrounded by your possessions, like a band of Arabs in the desert. When business is slow, so it shouldn't be a total loss, I use my time to keep an eye on the street. After all, if I don't keep an eye on it, who will? I heard you tell one of your tormentors that you're from Lake George Village."

"Oh, do you know Lake George Village?"

"Never heard of it. But if I concentrate I can almost..." He closed his huge eyes. "An image is coming to me through the mist. I see a small town. No, no, it's more like a village. And I see...I see water! Is it a river? The ocean? No, it's...a *lake!* And it's named after a person...wait a minute, wait a minute, it's coming to me. Is it Lake Nathan? No, not Nathan. Lake Samuel? No, not Sam—Ah! I've got it! George! It's Lake George, by George!"

I didn't mind his teasing. I could tell he loved to perform, and there were still a couple of kids outside the cornerstore, so I said, "We came to Albany to be with my father. He made a party for us."

"A party?"

"A Saint Patrick's Day party. He's out getting us a green cake."

"A green cake? H'm, I *did* see a man come out of 238 this morning. Dapper-looking gentleman, he was. And, you know, I remarked at the time that there was something in the way he walked that suggested a man on the trail of a cake. But I've got to be honest with you. From across the street I couldn't tell it was a green cake he was after. It could have been any color for all I knew."

"Yes, we're waiting for him to come back for the party."

A woman's voice from the back room called out in an exasperated

whine, wanting to know if Mr Kane was going to close up or did he intend to stay open all night! His soup was getting cold!

“Ah. My life-burden calls.” He chanted back, “Coming, dear.”

“Well, I better be getting home.” I put my quarter up on the top of the glass candy case that served as a counter.

“Why don’t I just put it on the slate until your welfare check comes in?”

“We don’t have any—”

But he was already opening the scuffed and thumbed notebook that was his ‘slate’. “Now, what name shall I put down? Mr and Mrs George, from the lake of the same name?”

My mother had punitively reverted to her maiden name after my father abandoned her with me still in her arms and Anne-Marie ‘under her heart’. To avoid confusion and comment she had entered me in school as Jean-Luc LaPointe, not using my father’s name. “LaPointe,” I said.

“...Mr and Mrs LaPointe,” he droned as he carefully printed the name at the top of a page. “The LaPointes from France, I assume?”

“My grandfather came from Canada. We’re part Indian.”

“Oh-oh. Not one of those tribes notorious for scalping shopkeepers and making off with his penny candies!”

“No, not that kind.”

“Whew! Talk about your close calls! So that’s fifteen cents for one jar of butter of the peanut variety...” he wrote, “...and five cents for a loaf of bread; size: small; age: one day old. Neonate bread, the bakers call it.” He closed the slate with a snap and waggled his thick eyebrows up and down above his huge eyes.

When I returned to our apartment with the bread, the peanut butter, and the quarter still intact, I had to explain to my mother that we were down on Mr Kane’s slate and didn’t have to pay until our check came in.

“What check?”

“I don’t know.”

“And he gave you credit, just like that?”

“I guess he gives everybody credit. The boys said he’s a Jew and he doesn’t give credit, but he does. He has a book that he calls his slate.”

“H’m!” She didn’t like the sound of that. She hated feeling be-

holden. Especially to strangers. "It'll be a hot day in hell before I go begging from strangers! What were you thinking of, Jean-Luc?"

"I don't know, I just—"

But she said never mind, she'd straighten things out in the morning.

We ate our peanut butter sandwiches at the kitchen table from which I had carefully cleared the paper plates and napkins so they could be replaced exactly where they had been for our Saint Patrick's Day party. I could tell that Mother didn't like my fussing that way. She was seething inside over something, so I kept my head down and didn't say anything. But Anne-Marie kept eyeing the bottle of lime soda. I told her we had to save it for the party, so everything would be green.

Mother sniffed. "Party! If I could find our bottle opener among all this crap, I'd open that soda quick enough. And I'd pour it down the sink!"

"But you can't. That'd spoil everything!"

"A big goddamn Saint Patrick's party! That's just like your father. You don't know his ways. I do. Always the big noise. The big show! He leaves us in the lurch for four years without so much as a word, and we don't know if he's alive or dead or what the hell, and now he's going to throw a big party, and that's supposed to make everything just fine and dandy! And the worst of it is that he's probably going to get away with it. Sure! When you kids are grown up, it won't be the years I've shrimped and saved and worked my fingers to the knuckle that you'll remember. It won't be how I've had to worry and fret, scared that I'd get real sick, and then what'd happen to you, I'd like to know. No, what you'll remember will be Ray's goddamn green Saint Patrick's Day cake! He runs away leaving me with all the work and worry, then he comes back with a big splash and we're all supposed to forgive him! Goddamn him to hell! And we're not even Irish!" But she shook her head and I knew that she was perversely proud of his cheek and élan. Who else would have had the brass to throw a party instead of saying he was sorry? Throughout the years we had been alone, whenever Mother got fed up with struggling to keep us in food and clothing, and especially when she was afraid she might be hospitalized with one of her lung attacks and social workers might come and take us kids away from her, she would give vent to her disappointment and fury. But after accusing

him of being weak and irresponsible and selfish, she always ended up mentioning, in a give-the-goddamned-devil-his-due way, that he was a smooth dancer and a nifty dresser and that he had buckets of charm and what she called 'real class'. Ruby Lucile LaPointe wasn't the sort to fall for just any pair of trousers. No, sir.

My sister and I knew our father only from a photograph taken during their two-day honeymoon in New York City in 1929: a slim, handsome man in a white linen summer suit, the jacket held open by a fist on one hip to reveal a silk waistcoat, a straw boater tipped rakishly over one eye, his smile at once knowing and boyishly mischievous. After their honeymoon, he sent Mother back to the village of Granville to stay with her cousin Lorna and her husband while he went down to Florida to join up with friends who had let him in on a foolproof enterprise that would make him lots of money fast. Something to do with land speculation. He would return at the end of the summer and they could begin their life together. On Easy Street, Toots! Over the next two weeks, my mother received a letter from him every day, then one a week for the next month, then silence, and her letters to him were returned 'Address Unknown'. I was born nine months and six days after their marriage, and as soon as she was strong enough after a difficult birth (I heard the clinical particulars of this exceptionally long and arduous birth many times) we moved away from Lorna and her husband, who always grumbled about having to share his house and food with a cousin-in-law and her squalling brat. Mother got a job as a waitress in the summer resort where she had met my father, and we lived there until a letter from my father was forwarded to her by her cousin. He had run into some 'trouble' that led to his becoming an honored guest of the state of Florida for a year and a day. He hadn't written because there was nothing she could do to help him, so what was the point of distressing her? But he was a free man again, and a wiser one, and he was coming back north to meet some friends in Montreal who were letting him in on a sure thing. He stopped off on his way and spent one night with us at Lake George. I think I remember a man who came bearing a very big teddy bear, but I might only be remembering my mother's description of his arrival on our doorstep, tipsy, singing, and bearing an oversized teddy bear with which he staged a comic

wrestling match to my giggling delight, ending up on the floor with the teddy bear triumphantly astride his chest as he begged for mercy. I wonder what happened to that teddy bear? Mother never said so, but I suspect she threw it out in a rage when he disappointed her again. The only time she ever spoke of this one-night visit she shook her head fatalistically and said, "All that man had to do was unbutton his suspenders and I got pregnant." The deal in Montreal fell through and my father disappeared from sight for a month or two. Then another letter came asking us to meet him in Schenectady, where he had reason to believe he could pick up a little action. His letter went on to say, "I know what anxiety and worry you've been through, Toots. All I ask is a chance to make it up to you. And remember... 'You Were Meant for Me'." This song title had little notes written around it. The citing of 'their song' and the coyness of '...as an honored guest of the State of Florida...' are typical of the letters from him I found among my mother's things after her death. She had saved every one of them, a total of nineteen, all written in a blend of jocular Runyonesque style, sudden sincerity, unabashed sentimentalism, and kittenish duplicity. In short, a con man's letters.

I should mention that my mother never told us that our father spent time in prison, presumably to protect us from the shame. I learned about this later, when reading over the letters she left behind.

We joined my father in Schenectady in the winter of 1932–33, the nadir of the Depression, when dazed men stood on street corners, the collars of their suit jackets turned up, and begged passers-by for jobs or handouts, hopelessness muting their voices to mantra drones. We survived on a series of short-lived scams he ran, penny-ante hustles that didn't require much setup money. One of these was the Sure-Fire Employment Agency that disappeared from its storefront office within a month. (Mother had one of the business cards for this fraudulent enterprise in her photograph album, its corners held by stick-on tabs.) Another hustle was selling exclusive franchises to market Jiffy Fifteen-Way Mirakle Kleener (Fels Naphtha bar soap cooked down in water, bottled, and labeled in the kitchen of our basement apartment to flash as samples of the product). I remember standing in the front room looking up at the window to see the legs of people passing by, some-

times followed by little doggies that sniffed the window and sometimes cocked a leg at it, their leashes leading up from their collars to... nowhere. The room was full of the nose-stinging steam of yellow bar soap being cooked down to make Mirakle Kleener.

The Sure-Fire Employment Agency scam provides an insight into the con-man mentality that reasons: If you can't find a job, then it must be possible to make money off other people trying to find jobs. And the jobs my father offered were opportunities to become franchised door-to-door salesmen of Jiffy Fifteen-Way Mirakle Kleener. This double-barreled scam shows how hustlers automatically think on the diagonal. Lots of men with no work and a family to support might have bottled and peddled Mirakle Kleener from door to door; but only cons like my father would have sold other out-of-work men *franchises* to sell it: offering them not only a chance to survive but an opportunity to 'Make a Killing in the Cleaning Industry!' because, let's face it, no matter how good or how bad things are, there'll always be dirt! My father had the con man's instinct for the jugular of human greed.

These low-grade scams ultimately built up a body of victims eager for an opportunity to inflict retributive damage (if I may imitate my father's hokum/comic style, à la W. C. Fields), so it is not surprising that after seven months in Schenectady he accepted an offer from 'some friends' to go to South Dayton, New York, and supervise the transport of what his first letter back to Mother called 'prohibited merchandise' from Canada to 'deprived communities'. National prohibition had just ended, but the old supply systems remained functional because there were still dry states and counties. A second letter told her that he missed her more than he could say because 'You Were Meant for Me', Toots. Following this letter, there was a three-year silence, during the first month of which my sister was born.

It was while we were in Schenectady that I ran away from home for the first time. For some reason, perhaps because the return of my father suddenly deprived me of my mother's undivided attention, I began to wet my bed at night, although I had been toilet-trained for a year. The first couple of times this happened, my mother dismissed it as a 'phase', but she was ultimately obliged to accept that it was full-blown regression. She decided to correct my urinary insouciance using a method

she had read about in a book on 'modern' child-raising, a book that was against corporal punishment, preferring bloodless tactics that caused only emotional and developmental damage. One evening she came back from shopping with a package for me. I eagerly tore off the wrapping and discovered to my surprise, but not to my horror, a dress that she had picked up in a second-hand clothing shop. Following the advice in her book, she told me that if I was going to act like a little wet-the-bed girlie, then I would have to dress like a little wet-the-bed girlie, and she made me take off my clothes and put on the dress. At first I didn't realize this game was meant to be a punishment. Dressing up like a girl seemed strange, but not shameful; and I was far from displeased by the attention I got as I pranced around the room in my dress. It was only when my father grasped my arm angrily and said that I would have to wear the dress like a little girlie until I decided to stop wetting my bed that I realized the costume was meant to be humiliating. I was first confused then hurt by the realization that my mother...my *mother* was trying to shame me. And this big man was angry because I had found the punishment amusing. I threw myself to the floor and kicked and screamed and tried to tear the damning dress off me. But I was put into my crib wearing the dress, and long after my incensed screams had collapsed into sobs and gasps, I lay in the dark, my teeth clenched.

I had overheard my mother talking about a naughty boy in the apartment above ours who ran away from home, not caring how much his parents suffered and worried until he was found and returned to them. This equipped me with the means to avenge my humiliation. I would run away to my grandfather LaPointe, who had been the only man in my life before the return of this *father* who had changed my loving mother into a woman who liked to shame me. They would suffer and worry about where I was, but I would never return to them; instead I would go live with my grandfather who had choo-choo trains and would give me rides all the time.

The next evening, when this...father...was safely out of the house and my mother was upstairs having coffee with the neighbor lady, I collected my knitted winter hat with a green tassel, a folded-over piece of bread for sustenance, and my red Christmas tricycle for transporta-

tion, and I left home forever. I can recall only blurred snapshots of the great escape: pushing my tricycle along the edge of a sidewalk crowded with impatient workers swarming out of some big factory; then night fell, and I was cold and scared. I remember waiting forever for the courage to cross a wide street with floods of noisy, speeding traffic, then being helped across by an old lady; and I asked a gasoline-smelling man in a service station with green-and-orange pumps which way it was to the choo-choo trains; and later I got tired of pushing the red tricycle, so I left it in a dark narrow space between two buildings where I could find it when I needed it. But I never found it again, and it started to rain, and I needed to poo very badly, but didn't know where to go, so I poo'd in my pants. A car pulled over to the curb and a policeman got out and asked me my name and where I was going, then he told the policeman in the car that I was the one the lady had called about, and that I smelled pretty 'high'. I remember being obliged to sit on newspapers in the back seat with the windows open as they drove me back home.

My mother cried and yelled and kissed me and smacked my legs and hugged me and cleaned me up and got me warm by bathing me in the kitchen sink, then she fed me and told my father that he'd better get rid of that damned dress or he'd have to deal with *her*, believe me you! I slept in my cozy crib that night, and never wet the bed again. I don't know what happened to the book on modern child-raising. I never saw it again.

My father went out the next morning to look for work. After a few days our money ran out, and my mother was obliged to accept that he wasn't coming back. She had been abandoned...again. She sent a letter to my grandfather and he took a day off from his job as station master of the whistle-stop railroad depot in Fort Anne to help us move back to Lake George Village. We were tided over by small amounts of money from my grandfather, who depleted his savings by helping to support his children and his nieces through the Depression. My first sure, unfragmented memories come from the time Mother and I and my new baby sister lived in Lake George Village with only a tin kerosene heater to combat the cold that seeped through the uninsulated walls of a two-room summer cottage. As a special treat after she got back from work

late at night, my mother used to make us toast on the top of that kerosene heater: toast that browned in the intricate hole patterns of the heater's lid. I loved the char taste of that toast, and the crunch of it between my teeth, and the late-night celebration of all being together. And I remember my grandfather's weekly visits. He used to smell of talcum powder and leather and he always took me on his lap and asked me how the world was getting on, then he gave me a lollipop. After supper, he would play two-handed pinochle with my mother and make her laugh by pretending to be furious about the rotten cards he'd been dealt. His visits were not only to give us the little money he could spare, but also to sustain us morally. I was enormously proud of my grandfather, and not only because he was in charge of trains and could click messages down a wire all the way to New York City, if he wanted to, but also because he was a half-blood Onondagan whose parents had immigrated to the United States from their unproductive farm on a tributary of the St. Lawrence. This meant that I was an Indian<sup>3</sup> too, although my grandfather's marriage to a woman from a New England family and my mother's marriage to a man of English extraction combined to dilute my Indian blood terribly. Nevertheless, I used to feel a secret and thrilling kinship with a bronze statue of an Indian drinking water from his palm in Lake George Village.

My grandfather's car skidded off the road in a blinding snowstorm when he was driving from Granville, where he had given money and encouragement to his niece and her husband, to Lake George, where he was going to do the same for us. When the news of his death came, my mother was sick in bed. She had caught a bad chest cold walking to work through the snow, and for days she had been lying in the back room, a wracking cough denying her sleep and bursts of high fever causing her to drift along the edges of reality—a recurring pattern of illness that was to become familiar over the years. The neighbor lady who was looking in on my sister and me assured us that Mother would make it through, "...so don't you worry your little heads." It hadn't even occurred to me that my mother might not make it through until the neighbor's assurances suggested that terrible possibility. And it was this same neighbor who got the telephone call about my grandfather and decided that the news of his death would be easier for my mother to bear if it came from me. This neighbor lady whispered into my ear that

my grandfather had been killed in a car crash, then she pushed me into the dark bedroom, and when I paused, unwilling, she urged me forward with impatient flicks of her fingers.

I sat on the side of my mother's bed—she smelled of sleep and the mustard tang of Balm Bengué—and I stroked her damp forehead as I told her that her father had gone to heaven. I was four and a half and she was twenty-five, and on that snowy evening I became my mother's confidant and 'good right hand', roles that were to continue throughout my childhood. I was proud of my newfound importance; but my retreat into long and complex story games began at this time.

Two years passed, and my mother had just been told that she wouldn't have a job come the summer because her bad health made her unreliable, when she received a letter from my father, a letter I have before me on my desk. He had made an 'error in judgment' for which he had been given five-to-seven in 'an institution dedicated to the moral reconstruction of those who take shortcuts to success and comfort'. But he had proved 'a contrite and willing pilgrim on the road to redemption' and had received early release after working as assistant to the prison librarian. He was now in Albany, the state capital, and he had rented us temporary lodgings until he was able to find a decent job...maybe in a library somewhere. He was all through with chasing rainbows. He was ready to settle down and make a life for his family. He knew he didn't deserve a second chance (or was it a third chance?), but... 'You Were Meant for Me', Toots. Remember?

Although Mother had vowed never to accept another thing from her cousin's husband after the way he had complained about being burdened with us, she swallowed her pride and wrote, asking if he could bring us and our stuff down to Albany in his old truck. During the trip, I looked out the side window at passing farmland, at the blur of bushes beside the road, and up at the telephone wires that seemed to part and re-weave, part and re-weave above us. And now we were eating peanut butter sandwiches in the kitchen of 238, and Anne-Marie and I were anticipating the Saint Patrick's Day party to celebrate our family's finally getting together to start a new life.

It was growing dark, so Mother turned the old-fashioned porcelain switch for the kitchen's naked overhead lightbulb. Nothing.

"Just like him! Didn't even think to get the electric turned on!"

I had an idea. I went into the bathroom and turned its switch, and the light came on. The kitchen bulb was only burned out. So we finished our sandwiches by the light from the open bathroom door. For some time Anne-Marie had been dipping and dozing on the rim of sleepiness, then her head would snap up as she fought to stay awake until her father came home with the green cake, which she was determined not to miss.

But Mother stood up with a sigh and said he'd come when he came, and there was no point in our sitting up all night. She unpacked the box containing our sheets and our most treasured possession, three Hudson Bay blankets given to her as a wedding present by my grandfather, and we made the beds together. The blankets were thick, top-quality, 'five-tail' Hudson Bays with those bands of bright color that fur traders thought would appeal to primitive Indian taste sufficiently to make them part with five beaver hides to get one. I had seen pictures of Indian chiefs wearing 'five-tail' blankets, and I wished the neighbors who had scoffed at our battered possessions out on the sidewalk knew that we also owned three of the best woolen blankets in the world. Mother put her reluctant but comatose daughter into the little bed in their bedroom, where, after making Mother promise to wake her up for the party, Anne-Marie instantly fell into a deep sleep, sucking her fingers. Mother and I sat at the kitchen table for a while, silent and with that metallic emptiness in the stomach that follows long periods of excitement. Then she said we might as well go to bed too. I could help her unpack in the morning. I kissed her good-night and told her I'd just set the table first, and I began putting the green paper plates and napkins back into place around the bottle of lime soda, while Mother watched me, shaking her head.

"You're my good right hand, Jean-Luc. I don't know what I'd do without you."

She kissed me good-night and turned out the bathroom light, and the crepe paper chains disappeared into the dark of the high ceiling.

I lay on my daybed in the front room, which never got totally dark because a streetlamp cast a diagonal slab of light from one corner to the other. I was looking up at the ceiling, intrigued by how, each time a car passed out on the street, the edge-ghost of its headlights slid through

and around the chandelier rosette in the middle of which a single light-bulb dangled from a paint-stiffened wire. I lay there for what was, for a kid, a long time, maybe ten minutes, until I thought Mother was asleep, then I eased out of bed stealthily and went to the window to watch for my father's arrival. He'd be the one coming down the street carrying the string-tied baker's box with a green cake that he'd finally found after going from one end of Albany to the other, and I would sneak out onto the stoop and beckon him in, putting my finger across my lips to signal him to walk on tiptoes, and we'd put the cake in the middle of the kitchen table and open the green soda carefully, so the *psfffft* sound wasn't too loud, and we'd get everything ready, then we'd go into the bedroom and wake Mother and Anne-Marie, and they'd be surprised and all smiles and...

I heard a faint sound from the back bedroom. I knew that sound, and hated it. My mother was crying softly to herself, as she did only when the bad breaks and the loneliness and ill health built up until they overwhelmed her. She cried when she was afraid, and the thought of my mother being afraid frightened me in turn, because if that buoyant, energetic woman couldn't handle whatever the problem was, what chance did I have? Sometimes, I would go to her and pat her shoulder and kiss her wet, salty cheek, but I always felt so helpless that the pit of my stomach would burn. Precocious at games and arithmetic, I had learned a couple of months earlier how to play two-handed 'honeymoon' pinochle, her favorite game and one that reminded her of her father. Sometimes playing pinochle took her mind off our problems. But the cards were deep in one of our boxes somewhere, and anyway, I didn't feel like sitting with her, helpless and hopeless. Everything would be fine when my father got back. Even if he hadn't managed to find a green cake...but I was sure he would...he'd care for Mother when she was sick and kiss her tears away when she was blue and play pinochle with her and take responsibility for keeping the family well and happy, and I'd just play my story games, and everything would be fine. I put my cheek against the cool window pane so I could look as far up the empty street as possible. People passed by occasionally: lone men walking slowly, their fists deep in their pockets, wishing this night were over; women hastening to get somewhere on time; young couples

with their arms around each other's waist, keeping hip contact by stepping out with their inside legs at the same time, wishing this night would go on forever. When a car passed, the edge of its headlights rippled over the brick facades on both sides of the street and lit up my ceiling briefly. I considered slipping into my shoes and going out onto the stoop to await my father's arrival, but the night was cold, so I sat on the edge of my bed with my Hudson Bay blanket around me Indian-style and watched the street, as I would do night after night.

My father never came. But, of course, you have anticipated that for some time.