

ALONG THE PATH

by

Robert Tracz

Let Everything that breathes-

without enemies, without obstacles,

overcoming pain and sorrow

and attaining happiness--

be able to move freely,

and each along the path

to which he is destined

Buddhist daily prayer for all humanity

This story is dedicated to all who suffered under the institutional flail: those who eventually triumphed, and the many who succumbed. And to the memory of Lili Boulanger (1893-1918) whose beautiful musical setting of the above prayer enlightens my soul.

I

Aim: Why Did Robert Tracz Hit Vincent Todler in the Face With His Spanish Text Book?

The year: 1972, Junior high school I S 303 Queens, New York City

“YOU MOTHER...F...” You want *my* book! Take this ..!”

Your text books are “keys to the kingdom.” No denying the fact they are definitely insipid-looking, dolefully monotonous and uninspiring-- not designed to excite young curious minds, but to discipline and focus youthful ardor into measurable skills expected from them in an unforgiving competitive world.

Spanish 2 is no exception. Not as large as science or history texts, but a little smaller and thinner than the required two math texts, it would be a logical choice to hit an enemy in the face with. Not a lethal copper-jacketed .30-06 caliber bullet, but heavy enough to smash bone and cart ledge. It’s author, Mister Harvey Glick, the retired chairman of Erasmus Hall, High School (once almost an elitist haven for serious students, now a “typical” Ghetto crime-ridden cesspool) foreign language department is proud that his book is continuing to help thousands of young students pass their Regents exams. He put together a no nonsense text stuffed with exercises paralleling the taxing demands of the State’s exams designed by the Board of Regents. There is a splattering of black and white photographs and a few line drawings that visually attract the eye away from the long columns of exercises and reading passages. Back in 1972, time and again, the New York state students are told that they are called to a higher standard than children being

educated in inferior states. Learn the lessons in your five text books and you will open the door to the “white collar” social class-- pregnant with doctors, lawyers, accountants, and occasional clergymen. You will not have to do manual labor like poor old Harold, the school custodian. You could even become a school principal, just like Mister Williams.

Meanwhile, poor old rickety *Spanish 2* ricochets off its intended target, splitting apart—torn to smithereens. Usually, when a book is returned to storage after being beat-up from 180 days of hard labor, a teacher inspects it, chalks-up a fine depending upon how badly desecrated the volume has become. Ribald pornographic graffiti is not uncommon. This particular book has become a palette for such imagery, and would have shocked the inspecting pedagogue when presented for inspection. Better that it dies by being ripped apart. In the meantime, there's a decked-out kid lying on the floor. He's not moving.

The book's current “owner” purchased a brand-spanking new protective plastic cover for it, as he did for four other equally old, tired-looking books that he drags around from 9AM to 3PM. Every teacher demands the text books to be taken to class, and despite their withered condition, be respected.

“I.S. 303, College Preparatory—*Home of Academic Excellence*,” is the school's motto—not *let's Have A Riot in Spanish Class*. The old used book—Glick's pride and joy---a precious key necessary to unlock the door of ignorance, gaining its owner access to a six figure income, seems to gasp for one more second of life. A sizable, audible “crack releases 378 pages that dance a graceful Tarantella in the stifling hot “Indian Summer” September humidity, that mockingly invades the non-air conditioned oven-like classroom. Eventually, the floating papers

nestle themselves on the newly resurfaced wooden floor, just lying there like pieces of over-sized confetti. All in all, a noble death.

The book's victim, the poor child who just got hit in the face, appears just as lifeless as the text book. Immobile, reduced to a doll-like figure, spread-eagle right under the wall-to-wall rectangular green blackboard, whose polished slate is covered from right to left with perfect curvilinear script. About ten students sit with hands clasped. Finished! They are the “Brightest and the Best”. The Nation’s future depends on their ability to transcribe their lessons. They *will* become doctors, lawyers, etc. The “average” group—the majority who will someday have to pay stiff fees for the professional services rendered by their superior classmates, are only half finished; the bottom of the heap-- the failing or barely passing, are not even done with the lesson's Aim: *How Do We Conjugate The Verb “To Be” in the Present Tense?* My god, they may not even graduate high school, winding-up in jail, becoming crushing burdens of society.

The entire class stops writing. A FIGHT! Now they will all have equal statue observing the chaos about to be unleashed. Mrs. Anita Backer, the stern, more than slightly hard-of-hearing middle-aged female Negro pedagogue responsible for writing the awesomely perfect curvilinear script, possesses a rock-hard body that has no problem bending and yawing as to the demands of writing on the lower levels of the chalkboard. The boys enjoy viewing her anal cleavage, made quite visible as her tight-fitting charcoal gray Armani pencil skirt is challenged to retain the perfectly-shaped buttocks, balanced by a pair of shapely legs encased in black hose. Her bright white blouse is translucent enough to reveal a mid-sized lacy *Victoria’s Secret “B-cup”* bra.

Robert, one of the last pupils to finish copying his teacher's demandingly *perfect* exercises, is getting hard watching the *perfectly* shaped cheeks stretch, glide, elevate, and descend, as their miserable owner writes her fucking lesson. Many of his male classmates are likewise sexually excited. The girls, most of whom are sitting up like wooden dolls, allow their eyes to roam. Their "privates" are far from wooden. They blush upon viewing a bulging crotch or two—or three! Some vaginas, hiding under mountains of thick public hair, are becoming quite wet. Erect nipples are pushing against tight-fitting bras. Mrs. Baker's sexy curves are creating a domino-effect: first the boys become erect, their adult-size dicks challenging the stitching of loose-fitting, gabardine or cotton pants chosen to conform to the school's scholastic ideals; then the girls "get hot and bothered" watching their male classmates "glorious masculinity" endeavor to break the bonds of propriety.

The uncircumcised penis owned by the semi-conscience boy lying in front of Mrs. Baker's chalkboard, is uncharacteristically limp as a wet noodle. He is one of the few boys in Greg's locker room who is not ashamed to strut around naked as a peeled shrimp. His uncut foreskin is a symbol of Aryan defiance in a very Jewish dominated environment. His enviously good looks render him much attention from the Jewish girls, who often fantasize about the varieties of sexual thrill that a differently shaped penis would afford. This boy defiantly chose skin-tight *Wrangler* jet-black denim dungarees to display his "family jewels" as he enjoys strutting through the insipid-looking throng of students dressed in sexless unrevealing cloths. His black leather "Garrison boots" are a warning as they click in menacing syncopation. Vincent Todler is as over-sexed as any 14-year-old young man could be. He enjoys displays of female sexuality. Rough-cast and crude, he does not appreciate the irony of the universally despised Mrs. Baker's curves turning-on his male classmates. The school has done its best in keeping

normal healthy sexuality outside its hallowed walls. The fact that the meanest, most miserable teacher in the entire world is also a hot piece of Black ass is lyrically absurd.

Robert, the boy who just smashed Vincent in the face with Glick's *Spanish 2*, is familiar with confrontations with the absurd. He has come across the concept of "irony" in his readings—some required; some chosen by him alone. Mrs. Baker's ass cheeks are another sexual tease, rendering the loneliness of his baleful world even more inhospitable. He is jealous that the kid who he just flattened—a former *Christian* friend, who flaunts his sexuality, having no problem achieving sexual success even at this tender age.

Todler is also extremely violent. It's an open secret that he and a small group of followers are responsible for a wave of mindless vandalism that is sweeping through the school: fires, smashed bathroom fixtures, flattened car tires, etc. He delights in tripping meek-looking 7th graders and pushing them down the stairs. No one ever complains. No one dares tell anything.

On the bus ride home, "king" Vinny holds court. The bus that carries students back to Eastern Forest Hills is not a yellow "cheese box" affair owned and operated by the school district. It is a regular public bus. There are no bus matrons, no police assigned to watch over things; just teenage students packed like sardines, along with the Tri borough Coach Corporation's usual cargo of adult patrons who sometimes are treated to scenes of mayhem and cruelty.

Vincent, along with most of his black-clad clan, sets-up court in the rear seats. Often they use their knives to cut-out their initials from the soft apostered seats this private bus line offers its passengers. The elderly patrons are aghast upon viewing the art show: Vincent raising the cut-

out letters high above his head, not fearing any retribution. Now, the hottest girls in school somehow manage to flaunt their sexuality that has been successfully repressed by the academic demands of the school they just escaped from. They cross their long legs, put on make-up, and flirt with Vincent and his crew. Often, they entire entourage lights-up cigarettes; again, irritating adult passengers who say and do nothing. Robert along with other meek-looking male students risk being spat upon if they approach the pretty girls too closely. Vinny has earned considerable fame as the best “Calmer” in the world. He has mastered the art of drawing phlegm from his throat and spitting it through his teeth with devastating accuracy. All too often, Robert is hit with this disgusting mélange, as the girls in the gallery laugh at his plight. To avoid this humiliation, Robert often walks the mile home. The laughs and mocking giggles spewing forth from the choirs of his pretty classmates is too much to bear.

Kerhonkson, New York: Robert’s Family Summer Cottage, The Weekend Before Robert Hit Vinny With The Book.

Robert is crying. He sees no other way. One of his fine weapons must be sacrificed. The 16-gauge double-balled shotgun he bought for a mere 50 dollars will do. The hack-saw has a new blade, so it cuts through the steel with ease. With his favorite weapon he has bagged rabbits, grouse, and even a raccoon. It will fit into his school knapsack without difficulty. Vinny and his side-kick Burk, have decided to follow Robert home. They promised to beat him to a pulp. Let the cock suckers try. It will be an easy ambush. Just after passing Merrill Greenbaum’s apartment house on Burns Street, there is a very narrow ally adjacent to the West Side Tennis Club. It may be called West Street? No matter. Robert will wait behind a large tree and kill them

both. Just like hunting deer. He may or may not get caught. He doesn't care. He has been pushed far beyond the limits of sanity.

Vincent Todler has not as yet met his fate. Mrs. Baker, who finally stops writing her lesson, is about to meet hers. She sees Vincent's steel-caste eyes penetrate his surroundings, finally staring at the boy who just flattened him. He smiles at Robert, now holding clinched fists, ready to fight. Deep down, Vincent may even now have a certain respect for the docile boy who he has been pushing around for so long. Mrs. Baker experiences acute chest pains. Not one of her 28 students sees her clasp her chest and totter to the floor. They want to see the impending fight. Classroom 101 is now a Roman arena. Robert would appreciate the "irony" of this hated teacher's close brush with the Grim Reaper, but his heart is beating so loudly, his body so pumped-up with adrenaline, poetic divisions would render him an easy target again. He must ape the part of a pro boxer-- or even better, Bruce Lee, brandishing fists of steel to his deadly opponent.

Of course Vinny's heart is beating hard too. Do the pale-yellow walls of Class Room 101 hear the voodoo-like throbs radiating from 15-year-old male bodies? If "walls have ears," they usually are more in tune with the muffled sound of rustling papers and scribbling pens. Maybe they have taken note of the march-like gait, an imposing display, the lord and master of her domain, Mrs. A. Baker, teacher of Spanish II, produces as she patrols up and down the aisles. In her room, you can literally "hear a pin drop." Can the students about to witness the fight hear the beating hearts? Are they aware that their teacher's heart is about to stop?

Robert possesses a congenitally defective heart. Will it hold-up to the stress? His 15-year-old body could be laying side-by-side along his hated teacher--both shrouded in official NYPD body bags. A macabre irony that even Vincent's Neanderthal disposition would get off on. *The world's meanest, most demanding Spanish teacher partners in death with the world's worst Spanish student!*

Will Merrill Greenbaum, the blond teenaged goddess, gleefully responsible for zillions of erections, don a diaphanously revealing yellow chiffon Roman-style toga and be invited by Principal Williams, the current Caesar, to place a laurel wreath over the victor's sweating brow? Her sensuous ruby red lips totally engulfing the victor's awaiting orifice, her golden hair wreathed in delicate white daisies and pink impatiens flowers, allowed to rest on the strong shoulders of the victorious gladiator. Will Vincent or Robert be so honored?

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Aim: What Is Junior High School Like in 1972?

Sitting in homeroom, waiting for the fucking bell to shock them out of indolence, Class 8-1 has no idea what a spectacle is going to take place in their first period class. The torpor of their lives will be temporarily assuaged. They will be transformed into a gallery of pagan Romans, unashamedly filled with blood lust. And when one chiding female student is hit in the face with chair, the *shit will finally hit the fan*.

Class 8-1 is chock full of the "Brightest and the Best!" Constantly honored as such, it is their almost sacred duty to uphold high academic standards. Falling asleep in first period class will never do. It matters little that you forced yourselves to stay awake well-after the 11 O' clock

news to finish homework assignments, usually totaling three to four hours of tasking labor. Mrs. Baker, the teacher of 2ed year Spanish, proprietor and Grandmaster of Room 101, never fails to provide at least half of the crushing burden.

Mister Louis Gerber, their *official* teacher is a youngish-looking, athletic, middle-aged pedagogue. Monday through Friday he appears regally dressed: gray flannel suit, silk tie, pressed white shirt, etc. He has earned 8-1's respect, and more importantly to him, his student's fear. You just don't fuck with "Mister Business!"

Will his devilishly handsome face, appearing as chiseled from a block of granite, ever nod in approval when a border-line student starts to show progress? Did he ever take delight in helping young people walk upon their chosen path? Did he once ever enjoy his students as individuals whom *he* could inspire to really become doctors, lawyers--or anything they want to be? Or is he in it for the 10 week summer vacation and a good pension?

Mister Louis Gerber *is* very typical of the majority of the teachers who are responsible for educating these bright, young teenage kids. Discipline problems are non-existent here. The pedagogical staff could, if they so desired, channel their energies and admitted skills into the art of *teaching*. Their time is not consumed by calling parents, conferring with assistant principals, giving lessons about the dangers of the outside world. But Gerber and his colleagues are tired and bored. Anybody can teach the gifted students sitting before them. Border-line students who need that extra push, that extra confidence, that indescribable aura a fine teacher lovingly endows, are forgotten, cut loose to drown in a sea of despondency, self-doubt, culminating in self-hatred. No one cares. As long as most of Gerber's kids ace the state exams, no one cares about the rest. No one cares...

It's just another day for class 8-1. Talking is not permitted in Gerber's homeroom, so begrudgingly "Mister Business" allows his charges to let their heads fall and nestle on the mountain of books they are required to drag to their five academic classes, five days a week: *Social Studies: American History, A Light to the World; Modern Biology and Life Science; Basic English Composition and Grammar; Algebra II, Spanish 2.*

The \$2.95 paperback: *Regents Algebra* by Sidney Dressler (another product of New York City's Board of Education) is always on the top of the heap. This is the only item kids must buy. Math is the most challenging hurdle the young people must overcome. The New York State Board of Regents exam in Basic Algebra is infamous in its difficulty. But these young masters of quadratic equations and intersecting x and y coordinates are by and large, only worried about scoring high. Time and again, they are told that their very lives depend upon success in these standardized tests. Almost the entire 40 minute period of every day is spent preparing for another such a test. Weekly tests are miniature Regents exams that most of Robert's and Vinny's classmates do rather well in. "The crème always comes to the top," a favorite saying that their teacher's use when handing out A+ papers. When returning B's and C's, the pedagogical faces are stone cold; and failing efforts receive a turn of a head, almost as not to smell the odor of spoiled milk.

Both Vincent and Robert are considered "mediocre" at best. The former hates English, the later hates Math. They share a common rage against Spanish-- especially against the imperial teacher, Mrs. Baker, who just happens to be one of the few minority teachers on staff. There's Miss Joya, a feisty young Hispanic, who is in charge of the girl's physical education; and there's Mr. Smith, an aging, late middle-aged black man, who still delights in teaching Social Studies.

Both are popular, respected, well-liked. Robert considers Mr. Smith a friend. Vincent slashed the *Nigger* teacher's tires.

The school bell—in reality an obnoxious ear-piercing blast—rings. It's exactly 8:40 AM. More like somnambulists than bright, young students eagerly in pursuit of academic excellence, 8-1's first task is to negotiate the removal of their pyramid of books from the desks and tote them to class. Everyone makes sure they have their Spanish text. It's their first period class, and Baker, like Mr. Gerber, doesn't fuck around.

A girl cradles her bundle against her bosom; the boys use their arm and hip to form a cavity to hold their pile. Most of the text books are just as tired and worn as Glick's Spanish text. All "The Best and Brightest" buy "official" plastic book-covers in an attempt to make a "silk purse out of a sow's ear." Even a mediocre student like Robert can follow suit, looking like he is college bound.

I.S. 303's logo is a school bell held by a firm hand. It appears on all the book covers that neatly hide the miserable condition of the five text books. It's unlikely that the teenage student body remembers their beloved Miss Francis peeling a similar instrument on one of the first televised educational television shows: *Ding-Dong School*. All kids-- not only "The Brightest and the Best," are welcomed to her kindergarten class. As six-year-old kids-- wide-eyed and bushy-tailed, they all had fun and learned the lessons too. *They were classmates not competitors*. Now, 15-year-old young adults rarely experience that sense of family, as they toil to place high in the dreaded State examinations. School is not supposed to be "fun" anymore. And there isn't room at the top for all.

Any mediocre student who covers his worn textbooks with brand-new official school book covers, could be taken for the “Brightest and the Best”. But the books now covered with shinny, slippery plastic slide all over the place, especially when held under the arm. So for fifty cents more, a wise college-bound student is encouraged to buy a rubber strap that will girth the bundle tightly.

Upon leaving Home Room number 112, Robert will notice that the four new students from Israel use semi-military-looking knapsacks to haul their load. What a great idea! His sawed-off 16 would fit!

Classmates are incredulous when the usually meek and shy Robert tells of hunting with his very own rifle. “No, it's not a BB-gun. Ass-hole! The 300 grain hollow-point bullet would blow a hole through you as wide as the Holland Tunnel. For target practice, we prefer a .22 pump-action Peter's rifle. Both my Dad and brother are crack shots. But yours truly is better than both of them. Without really trying, I can shoot the eyes out of a squirrel at 100 yards. Don't believe me? You'll see.”

So now the boy pushed beyond the edge; the boy who nobody wants to help; the boy who is planning to take a gun to school; the boy who is going to commit double murder, is getting sexually excited viewing his teacher's well-shaped bottom. But the horny kid is a hunter, a real *Deer slayer*. He will endeavor to envisage himself treading through his beloved woods, firearm in hand, stalking for game. Today his concoctions are surrealistic, nightmarish. The fact that Vincent's bullying has lately intensified is in all likelihood responsible for Robert's usual escapes into a bucolic fantasy to be fortified.

Who knows what Robert's classmates are imagining while their tired heads are resting on the foot-high pyramid of text books. Robert is planning on killing Vincent Todler. His artistic vivid imagination never ceases to paint wish-fulfilling dreamscapes.

Robert is dressed in his usual green camouflaged hunting outfit. But instead of hiding behind his favorite oak tree, he finds himself transported to the main floor of his fucking school. It's strangely empty of passing students; you only hear the omnipresent hum of florescent lights. Robert is confused, but conceals himself behind a massive exit door, its illuminated sign glowing red like a solitary beacon piercing an immense darkness. Then, each light magically extinguishes itself one by one—out of something like the mysterious castle in the classic movie *Beauty and the Beast*. The familiar menacing syncopation of boot-clad feet violates the reassuring silence. The awaiting hunter responds by sliding two bright-green fluted Winchester double 00 buckshot (super X) shells into the breach of a double-barreled 10-gauge European shot gun—a family heirloom used by his Grandfather to kill many a stag, fox, or airborne fowl. Last night, Robert replaced the nitroglycerine-based powder with a black-powder mix. Damascus steel barrels would never survive a modern charge. Black powder should do just fine.

All this Robert does himself. Besides shooting guns, he can repair them, modify them, etc. He's quite proud of himself. Really! Many “academically challenged” students excel in “industrial arts” classes: electric, wood, ceramics, and even home economics. The rub is in the fact that these grades are worthless, not included in any final average, not even as important as a phys ed. grade. Robert and Vincent have done very well in such classes. Maybe they should set their sights on a “commercial-industrial” education. Mr. Rosner, their mutual guidance counselor believes so.

Vincent's mother is OK with that. Her son is already cutting lawns in Forest Hills Gardens. The rich and super-rich—the *hoi palloi* wants the affable, handsome young man to cut their lawns. He does an impeccable job, not leaving one blade of unsightly growth to render the enclosed mansions inhospitable. And the young Vincent's hands can resurrect old, tired-looking Snapper mowers, into vibrant grass-greedy machines. Jamaica Vocational High may be the way to go.

Robert's mother is another story. Her son reads Shakespeare, paints landscapes, composes sonnets, and is seriously musing about becoming a teacher. Old classical records hiding in a dark, forgotten corner of a closet are discovered, dusted off and are being played. Manuel De Falla's *Nights in a Garden of Spain* and a Frederick Delius piece, *A Walk Through A Paradise Garden*, are constant blissful sonic backgrounds, heard upon entering 68-21 Olcott Street. Mrs. Tracz graduated from the school that is being recommended for her son. She desired a college education above all else. She had the grades and a flair for art. Her family endowed with six children, did not possess the financial resources to send her there.

Does her Robert have to be amongst “The Brightest and the Best” to attain his dream? Does he have to have a 90 average in 8th grade? She remembers Mr. Rosner’s examination of his academic record: barely passing in Math and English. A 55 in Spanish, a 75 in Science and a respectable 85 from Mister Smith in Social Studies.

Mrs. Tracz knows her Robert. He never learned how to spell, possesses an inscrutable handwriting, and has not inherited his Father's wizardry with numbers. With the exception of the foreign language class, taught by the unbelievable Mrs. Baker, he never “failed” a subject. He never gives up. Never.

Mister Rosner is not being deliberately harsh. He is just reflecting the prevailing standards that are an unfortunate reality in this super-competitive pressure-cooker of a school. Forest Hills High school, the next step on the path of college preparation would be a disaster for one with mediocre grades. Robert would be overwhelmed.

The future has a habit of unpredictability. Saul Rosner's crystal ball could never predict this boy's ability to work hard. Nor could he see any value in his poems and paintings that his mother placed before his very eyes. He is part of a system, usually overwhelmed and callous to the individual. Robert's mother is not just a mother. Her sensitivity and innate intelligence see these same qualities in her son's efforts. Someday someone in school will see what he is capable of. And he is his father's son too. He is born to a tradition that doesn't see failure as an option.

Mrs. Kathryn Tracz is mad as Hell. If her son was Jewish, would Rosner be more optimistic about his future? It's obvious that this school is run by Jews. It has a 90% Jewish student body, and is right in the heart of Forest Hills, a high-class Jewish ghetto, When she decided to send Robert there, she was hoping high educational standards would motivate her son to do well. How could she predict her son's frustrations in trying to keep up with the sons and daughters of super-competitive, super-intelligent doctors and lawyers? How could she foresee the nasty prejudice targeted toward ethnic Poles, who the Jews labeled "collaborators" with the Nazis in a war over before her son was born?

Her son's friendship with the Israeli Jew, Murray was the best thing that ever happened to Robert. He is now socializing, *showing interest in girls*, not complaining about his isolation. His grades are still poor, as are Murray's.

Murray Rothstein is counselee # 677 on Rosner's alphabetical list. Occupying a tinny office adjacent to the Principal's plush huge multi-chambered affair, Rosner, a smallish late-middle aged man who wears cheep miss-matched combinations of ties, Jackets and paints, could be said to be the most overwhelmed professional in the building. Teaching American history, not guiding students at this most difficult juncture on their path to self-fulfillment, occupied the first 10 years of his tenure in the Board of Ed. One day, at the gossip-filled faculty room in I.S. 8—the worst school in District 28, a colleague described *guidance* as, “the softest position in the school”. So, the ever-ambitious young teacher (who was one of the few Caucasians in this tough South Jamaica middle school) took enough courses to gain the necessary license and a seniority-based transfer to I.S. 303. He did not miss the classroom one iota, rather enjoying his freedom to set his own schedule, which largely consisted of meeting parents, planning paths of study his super-successful students would to privy to. And now he is tenured in a lily-white Jewish-dominated school where he could park his car without worrying about vandalism, robbery, and personal harm coming his way.

He was prepared to deal with hordes of parents wanting him to explain why their kids were not necessarily a shoe-in to attend Harvard, Yale, or M.I.T. Rosner did not foresee the absence of the other counselor who took a long-awaited sabbatical, approved just as the new term began. Red tape and administrative ineptitude stifled a suitable replacement. His little pigeon hole of an office is cluttered by mounds of permanent record folders (a commuter based data bank is as yet years away), that superior students who desire to earn service credit, would routinely carry from the walk-in safe nestled in a corner of Principal Williams office, then placing the pile on a vacant space on his old gray iron desk. Sometimes the pile reached beleaguered counselor's eye-level.

To make matters worse, too often, the affable Lord and Master of IS 303 would mess-up the procession of “The Best and the Brightest” carrying heavy bundles of manila folders. They handle the precious cargo like they are in charge of golden bars being extricated from a mine shaft. Principal Williams would stop any group containing a majority of pretty girls. “Please just place the bundles anywhere. You are doing a great job. Please come in my office for soda or coffee. And my bagels are always fresh.” They chatted with the flirtatious Principal, who made them comfortable while he asked them about their hopes and aspirations. He used to talk about baseball, but these bright, pretty girls couldn’t care less. From his home, Williams brought back an autographed photo of Barbara Streisand. To a one, they are mesmerized by his tale involving a meeting with the super star at Shea Stadium, home of his beloved *New York Mets*. When the pretty coeds finally were allowed to go back to class, the permanent Records were piled all over the place. In Rosner’s office, waiting parents were forced to reschedule their appointments as the now enraged counselor is forced to ask his Boss to enter his office on another scavenger hunt.

On this particular day (the same day Murray Rothstein’s aunt is scheduled for an appointment), the voluptuous medical school bound Sara Cummings, when leaving her Principal’s office, feels a pinch on her derriere. The poor girl drops her bundle, and Williams helps her gather the folders. “My god she’s stacked. Must be 44 D cup at least,” he soliloquizes. Her deep brown eyes, like pools of molten chocolate, can not but help meet his 50ish year old dark gray peepers. They both are blushing profusely. Their bodies bend and yaw in unison, tiding-up the mess. “She’s no great beauty, but possesses an animal sexuality...,” he ponders. Her butt resembles two large cherries, whose contours seem to fight the confines of the mauve paint suit that would be acceptable school dress. The faux paw the old goat committed could cost him his job—everything he worked for. He lost control. Thank god her face, now almost the same shade

of red as her lipstick, posts a returning flirtatious smile. She can not stay for snacks because she is missing an academic class. Williams tells his secretary to find her schedule and keep it handy.

Jack Russ, the Assistant Principal, equally overwhelmed with work, would send Rosner official antidotes concerning a few students who he considered discipline problems. But now, incitements involving sexual harassment are becoming more common. Pretty girl's asses are common targets, not only for a Principal, but for the newly-arrived Israeli students. And now, even, nice boys—nice Jewish American boys--are coping feels. The assistant Principal has carefully documented the incidents. So far, not one of the girls has really complained. But just one could bring real trouble. The little over-sexed boy from Tel Aviv named Murray Rothstein has started an avalanche. Someone has to stop it soon.

Murray Rothstein is just another student to Mr. Rosner. He is aware he is one of the 18 boys from Israel. He does recall Russ talking to him about a boy who was making a habit of “feeling up” the girls. But he is an alarmist. And besides, guidance, not hostile behavior is his job. The new Israeli students are fine young men, asking for solace on a sea of trouble. How can they expect to be perfect? Since they are temporary residents, their placement in the proper City high school is a moot point. Many of their guardians and parents just don't bother with the conference. But this Rothstein kid's aunt has called several times. And Rosner seems to recall airmailed letters sent from Tel Aviv.

So at 2:30, after seeing an even dozen parents, Murray and his temporary guardian, Aunt Ida, enter the tinny office. There is another young man with the little Murray. Rosner assumes it's a brother or cousin; but no, it is Robert, another student who Rosner vaguely remembers. “Please wait outside young man,” Rosner directs Robert, smiling, visibly exhausted, surrounded

by piles of records resembling battlements at the Alamo. The student nods being aware that these sessions are *family only* affairs. “No Bob. Stay here. *Is it all right...*Mr. Rosner?” Murray answers sarcastically, defiantly.”

“It’s highly irregular. Very well,” Rosner answers, with the knowledge that foreign students are sometimes used to different protocols. Now all three are seated, each watching the counselor’s perusal of Murray’s records. Rosner appears upset, reading out loud in a soft mummer, pregnant with nervous cadence. Murray has earned grades quite similar to his friend, Robert, with the exception of five red u’s earned for unacceptable conduct. “Mrs. Stern, this is not what is expected from an I.S. 303 student. “Murray’s father, is still in Israel, I presume. He must be told as soon as possible,” Rosner pleases, his eyes finally raised meeting with the little curry-headed kid slouching in the big comfortable imitation leather chair. Murray stands-up and answers, “I don’t give a shit what you tell my Father. You are blowing smoke up my aunt’s backside. With that he storms out of the office, giving Rosner the finger. Aunt Ida can’t help but laugh.

“Wow! That was boss. Where did you learn that expression,” Robert inquires.

“What...Oh...Blowing smoke up the ass...Your American TV of course.”

As he walks back to class side-by-side with his best friend, Robert recalls his legendary grandfather, Joseph Tracz Senior (pronounced Trace with a long “a”), the family's genetic fountainhead, who was also a great curser. He may have been born a *peasant*, but he built a successful farm out of nothing, raising prize-winning horses. Not at all interested in an

academically enriched life, he preferred guns and firearms over pen and paper. At a shooting exhibition in the year 1912, his skill with military firearms so impressed the Emperor Franz Joseph, that he dismounted from his imperial-looking white horse and gave his sergeant a red felt pouch that jingled with extra 25 golden Krone. Even though an ethnic Pole, Robert's Granddad enlisted with the Austrian Army. Poland sandwiched between Russia and Germany was not ruled by ethnic Poles. It was an Austrian-Hungarian culture as much as Slavic. Like Robert's entire opportunistic family, Joseph Tracz Senior knows where his "bread is being buttered". And like every male in the clan, he is hard-working, physically strong, and a natural born hunter. Joseph Tracz Senior is also a womanizer, a religious hypocrite, a potentially swindling-thief. His son, Robert's Uncle Joe, born in New York City, inherited all these traits. Robert's father, Steve, is cast from the same mold. But the Robert Tracz who has just been told he is not good enough to obtain an academic diploma is in a way, a unique combination of the Apollonian and Dionysian. His friendship with Murray is bringing out the Dionysian—a trait that his school has up to now, totally repressed.

By the way, Robert did not shoot Vinny and Burke. When he hit his tormenter with the book, he unleashed a chain of events that led to his gaining admittance to Saint John's University. He graduated with honors and earned his Master's from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts—Next to Oxford, the finest graduate school in the world for the history of the visual arts. He became a teacher, and is now retired, living in Florida. His memories of junior high school haunt him, producing this manuscript.

But for now, Robert is still sitting in Gerber's home room, mentally rehearsing a possible retribution for being harassed so viciously.

It's now time to close the shotgun's breach. To wait any longer would risk his pray hearing the muffled snap. The darkness still conceals his prey. The teen-age hunter can barely see the copper-colored percussion caps, smooth and shinny, awaiting the sharp mechanical thrust of twin firing pins. Robert's target is now only yards away. Robert hears his own beating heart! It doesn't skip a beat. But he must gain control of his shaky hands.

The hunter regains his composure, now holding his breath so to not spoil his aim. Robert nestles the weapon under his shoulder, and as his father taught his oldest son, and his father taught him: "just take a little of the sight and... S-Q-U-E-E-Z-E .

Robert fires the right barrel. The left explodes as well. The Krupp-German--made ten-gauge cannon kicks like a mule! His experienced hunter's body absorbs the shock. The blast echoes through the entire school. The acrid smell of exploding black-powder invades his nostrils. The school's offical round, glass-covered clock has stopped at exactly 9:35. Robert S. Tracz, hunter, woodsman, artist-- mediocre student, likes the smell of exploding gunpowder in the morning! "Got ya! Mother Fucker!"

Vincent Todler's body lies lifeless, deprived of its head, which is now spattered up and down the corridor that usually is stuffed with students desperately trying to class on time. Portraits of Lincoln and Washington (both quite skilled in the use of firearms) seem to smile in approval.

Gradually, the sound of scuffling feet and squeaky wheels, invades the tomb-like silence. Thank god! It's only Harold, the senior school custodian, summoned to another call of duty. He's dragging an old gray cart, a platform for his bucket and well-worn mop. He sees the mess, shrugs

his shoulders, and gets to work. With long, semi-circular strokes, the yard-long gray strands of a commercial cleaning mop entangle pieces of skull and brain, as it glides across the slippery concrete. After a few dips of the blood-saturated mop into a ten-gallon capacity bucket, the water is cherry red. Another trip to the “slop sink” will be necessary.

Harold is another sportsman who would like to be “shooting” himself, instead of cleaning-up Vincent Todler's shattered head. He's a fellow fisherman too. Once in a while, Robert talks to him, both spinning yarns and sharing feelings of hatred for their mutually repugnant environment. “Sorry about the mess, Harold,” Robert's teenage tenor voice, still crackling here and there, breaks the stone-cold void. His granddad would be especially proud. Germans have always been arch-enemies of his blood. His grandson just sent another vicious, Pole-hating Hun to Hell.

“No problem, *Bob*. Nobody will miss that little scumbag for sure,” Harold responds. They give each other the “high five!”

Robert's hatred of Vincent Todler is so intense he is seriously contemplating taking the sawed-off shotgun and blowing-off two heads. The shy, sensitive, artistic Robert is on edge—pushed beyond the fringe. How long will the genetic disposition inherited from his father's family remain dormant? Nobody that knows the Tracz family fucks around with them.

Robert is still in that abysmal room—his home room, not ready to shoot anybody as of yet. He is of course, satisfied with the outcome of his day-dream. He contemplates doodling on his desk. But the horrific rendering of Todler's decapitated body would take too long. For now

the pictures of Mrs. Baker being hanged, drawn and quartered, will do. The bell finally rings. The mournful procession to Mrs. Baker's room finally commences. Robert is a partner in misery, briefly accepted by his fellow classmates.

Shit! Robert discovers his *pink* elastic strap is gone. He just purchased it before home room started. How will he tie-up his text books now? The blond blue-eyed 9th grade beauty, a volunteer who is receiving *service credit* for manning the school store, took his two quarters in exchange for the sling-like piece of elastic. She offered a stream of sardonic giggles along with his change. Why does she laugh? The school store only had *pink* elastic straps left. The masculine *blue* variety was sold-out! The girl ridiculed Robert Tracz—the hunter who in reality displays almost pathological shyness in front of beautiful girls.

Sexual innuendos, put downs, and petty insults are as innate to the junior high school environment as are exams, late passes, and tons of homework. Insecurities spawned from the psychological turmoil of this most difficult time of life are as commonplace as the lurid graffiti scribbled on the bathroom walls. *Robert should be able to dish it out as well as take it.*

Robert, his mother's shy son, is just too sensitive. Puberty and an academically demanding educational environment is a double-barreled shotgun pointing directly at him. He dodges the onslaught by retreating into his self—a self who yearns, “to be able to move freely along the path to which he is destined. *“God, I want to become a beautiful man—an artist, a lover, a father!”*

In elementary school, Robert was a rambunctious, loquacious little boy who played dodge ball, teased the girls, and painted amazing pictures-- finally earning the 6th grade

sheepskin, like the rest of his classmates, most of which he considered his *friends*. His success in art and science were praised by all. In P.S. 144, the little man learned how to read and write without constantly being “put down.” The fact that he, along with his male classmates now possessing man-sized dicks, have been rendered fearsome competitors, all grasping for the golden ring offered on the merry-go-round. The ring that only *The Best and Brightest* could possibly obtain.

His pitiful guidance counselor who is responsible for 800 students, is only concerned with Robert’s grades, not his feelings, hopes and dreams. There is no school psychologist. Without the guiding light he desperately craves for, his chosen path will only lead to unfulfilled dreams. And the dangerous, quick-tempered gun-slinging part of his soul may resurrect itself, doing serious harm to others and his self.

The junior high school Robert is attending is not a place for shy introverted artistic types. The beautiful blond girl who sold Robert the pink strap could have assuaged the embarrassment that his reddened face advertised: “. . .just hide it for now... don't worry...you don't look gay...etc.” She's just as emotionally immature as he is—but in a very different way. She's popular, an academic super-star, probably possessing a kind and forgiving nature. She wouldn't kick Adolf Eichmann out of the *Humane Society*. Alone, she's a fine human being—in a group of teenage peers, she, “goes with the flow” that unleashes adolescent cruelties that hurt and sometimes destroy students, who for a myriad of reasons, are not strong enough to repel the blows.

When Robert suffers “bulling” from Vincent Todler, or is forced to buy an effeminate-looking rubber strap, she will undoubtedly “get her rocks off,” enjoying the spectacle of

emotional—sometimes physical pain. She becomes a pagan Roman viewing carnage in the Coliseum.

Shit! Robert's *pink* elastic band is really fucking missing. “I probably dropped it in the unbelievably crowded hall way adjacent to the school store,” he says to himself. Mr. Gerber is now busy “chewing a new asshole” out of a late arriving boy, so Robert dares to break the rules and deposits the majority of his burden back in his assigned locker, on the bottom row. Robert wouldn't bother to ask Gerber for a higher locker that would better accommodate his super-tall body. You have a big dick now. You are a man. Cope with it.

Now, Robert has only his loose-leaf and the dreaded Spanish text book to carry around. To escape Gerber's roving eyes, he adopts the manner of Groucho Marx: hunched over-- knees bent low, taking giant steps away from the chaos he cooked-up. Robert escapes unscathed, feeling pretty fucking good with himself. *For once, he got away with something.* The throng beckons. Mrs. Baker expects class 8-1 to be promptly on time.

After ten days of school “Silent Passing” has just been lifted. Packed like sardines, two thousand sexually mature students jostle through the stifling-hot corridors painted “institutional green.” The building was designed to only handle half that number. Upon leaving homerooms, a giant spasm of murmuring inscrutable conversation invades the institutional silence. If a linguist could decipher the gibberish, he would be treated to a teenage anger fest: vicious gossip, cruel put-downs, sexual speculations, etc.

A scant three minutes are given to arrive to the next class. In this short space of time, somewhat miraculously, the seemingly anonymous “student body” is arranging itself into a

social hierarchy as it plods along. Popular girls mesh with popular girls, popular boys, etc. The segregation is usually based on physical attractiveness and academic success. Robert strike-out twice, but today he carries something in his pocket that promises to liberate him from social isolation. When Robert showed it to a group of pretty girls on the bus, they actually called Robert, *Bob*. Vincent Todler tried to grab it from him.

Robert painfully aware he is approaching Baker's room feels an unwanted presence. *He's* being stalked—for real! Two of his classmates are pushing and rubbing against his back. Suddenly, he feels a stinging pain. “What the f....” Someone is whipping his butt cheeks. But with what? He turns his head and sees Vincent Todler and James Burke. Now he knows that happened to his elastic band! One of the cock-sucking, mother-fucking bastards ripped it off. The Mick? The Kraut? One of the pair is using it to hurt him. “Ouch! Fuck!” It hurts!

Robert and his attackers are surrounded by gum-chewing *bitches* who are giggling up a storm. Not one expresses disapproval. Robert turns his head and views a scene right out a painting by Francisco Goya: mocking Hellish sardonic laughter directed at *him*. His mother says to ignore such torments. Showing emotion will make things worse. For once, he is glade to see Room 101. He will gladly exchange the humiliations he must suffer inside the classroom, with the torments he is experiencing now. Thank god he will be upstate this weekend. The 16-gauge is waiting.

III

Aim: Why is Mrs. Baker an Ugly Witch With a Tight-looking Ass?

So class 8-1 lines-up, waiting to enter Room 101. There's another irony here. In George Orwell's nightmarish portent, *1984*, Room 101, in *The Ministry of Love*, the rebellious Winston Smith, is about to have his face devoured by starving rats. But he confesses to *Big Brother*, putting off his final liquidation. Can the pedagogue who rules this room 101 with an iron fist offer a postponement, a temporary reprieve? Only if a substitute teacher replaces her. But class 8-1 sees no such figure. Baker is here. Fucked again.

Yesterday Robert was fucked-over in typical fashion. He was directed to stand up and recite a Spanish greeting to a pretty coed—almost as sexually enticing as the blond-bombshell who sold him the pink strap. Baker demands a grammatically correct greeting to her and an imaginary father: “Como Esta Usted, Se llama...” Robert slowly pronounces, thinking he did pretty well.

“Now Robert! You have just called her father a lama...” Robert's classmates offer a humiliating chorus of cruel laughter. Then Robert looks to the ceiling, possibly expecting divine intervention. “Robert, you will not find the answer on the ceiling,” the sarcastic pedagogue replies. Next victim *por favor*.

Everyone—even the Brightest and the Best will have a turn to be embarrassed; everyone will have to do her two hour homework assignments, and everyone will have to take her frightful exams that would have given Cervantes shit-fits.

Mrs. Baker, her hair up in a tight bun, arms folded on her chest, peers out of her round horn-rimmed glasses. She places herself before the silent students lined up like wooden soldiers.

For the next 40 minutes, they are *all* hers. The teacher allows a slight expression of contentment to be seen by the kids. It looks like 100% attendance. And even Vincent and James are not late.

Class 8-1 marches right past her imposing figure, ready for inspection. She enforces the “no gum” rule with a vengeance. Baker, a veteran teacher, knows that gum-chewing is a symbol of teenage defiance. Almost every one of the 28 students deposits their chew in the room’s wastebasket, situated adjacent to the front entrance door. A few will hid gum in between their cheeks and gums, and others will stick it under their desks, trying to set a gooey trap for a student who will use the desk after 8-1 leaves.

Along with the Irish scumbag named James Burke, Robert is the tallest kid in the school. His six-foot-two inch frame qualifies him for an assigned seat well in back of the room. But Mrs. Baker’s eyes miss nothing. Last week, she saw Robert drawing, not copying from the board. “Now Robert, those pictures will not get you into college? Will they?”--a mild, very typical sardonic approbation from her, that nevertheless causes his classmates to break-out in another mocking giggle. His punishment is to be reassigned to a pint-sized desk placed in the front row. He must hunch down in response to students pleading, “Mrs. Baker! I can't see the board! Robert's head is in the way.” He has to bob up and down like a fisherman's float. To complete the discomfort, he finds his fat thighs too bulky to slide under the short-kid's desk. To sit, he must literally lift the fucking desk off the floor.

The piece of gum that Robert’s pants find under his newly assigned desk may be said to have been responsible for Baker’s heart attack and the serious injury to a female student’s face. Everyone has a breaking point. So after the humiliating whipping, the gum messing-up his paints, it’s no wonder that Robert finally explodes. Just before Todler tried to grab the item from

Robert's pocket, he decided to not copy his lesson at all. Unforgivable! "Let that fucking Black bitch stop me," Robert says to himself. But this teacher's gyrating ass cheeks are sexually exciting, so he stops doodling on the cover of his three-inch-thick, canvas-bound loose-leaf notebook.

Most of the required loose leaf notebooks owned by the students in class 8-1 appear hardly worn. Their pristine condition is symbolic of their academic success. Honor students enjoy licking hundreds of circular *reinforcements* that they loop over the triple rings, opened like a set of beckoning mechanical jaws. With a reassuring "click," close to a ream of college-ruled, stone-white paper is prepared for its daunting task: recording a year's worth of Math, English, Science, etc. Pale-yellow section dividers strategically organize the classes. Plastic tabs in vivid pure primary colors, jutting-out over the tome's edge, are, for some, the most color they will ever see in their dismal world. So being an artist, just like his mother, Robert like most boarder-line students, uses the book as a palette and canvass—a Freudian blackboard whose "autonomic" scribbles wreath crude images of repressed super-charged violence and overt sexuality. But his pictures are much more realistically rendered. From his mother's side, he is here to skills that are very advanced, to say the least. Robert can even sketch a likeness in under a minute.

His dick can become hard in less time than that. So as he sat mesmerized by the Witch's ass, and when Todler harassed him again, he did not retreat on to himself. He became a *Tracz*, attacking like a lion, ready to tear the throat out of his enemy.

Aim: What is an Institution of Learning?

Everyone “hates” school in one way or another—it's the “in” thing. Lunch room conversation is pregnant with complaints; like soldiers in war, it's their right—an integral facet of their identity, as each group faces the trials, and tribulations facing them daily. Unlike uniformed adults in harm's way, all the children usually physically survive. It's rare that some accident or illness prevents this. Emotional survival is something else again.

Schools can not help being institutions. Limits imposed by time, space, money favor the majority. The rest are often left out in left field. Back in the 1970's schools were over crowded. 2000 students along with Robert and Vincent were crammed into a space designed for half that number. Everyone—teachers, administration, and students, were cheated to a certain extent. But the throng was a disciplined motivated bunch of kids, emotionally “strong.” The few who were not fit, were denied emotional fulfillment; and if their grades were not up to par, denied an academic education. *What would have happened, if Robert did not resort to violence?*

Our story culminates in violence—not the shocking, horrific violence of *Columbine*, or *Sandy Point*; but *violence* none- the-less. And as in all such cases of institutional violence, it could have been prevented. The harassment inflicted by the strong who prey upon the weak, has not been totally eradicated from our schools. And in a bizarre way, the headline-grabbing carnage of recent school massacres has forced the schools to see a student pushed, shoved, verbally humiliated, etc. as a dangerous portent.

We have come a long way since the 1970's. It's unthinkable that pleas of “Bullying” will continue to be ignored by armies of guidance counselors, psychologists, and uniformed guards.

Mrs. Baker would never be allowed to humiliate a student. But human nature, American Pop culture—call it what you will, honors the strong and the violent. Victims of their power usually are exiled to live outside the collective conscience, not being worthy of a minor headline in some obscene tabloid that earns a living by feeding sex and violence to a greedy audience. The meek do not inherit the Earth.

Why was *violence* the only solution? And why did *he, a former victim* also crave the limelight that the physically strong inevitable bask in?

V

Aim: What Does the Word Valediction Mean?

The American flag flies high, gently animated by the, as yet, cool summer breezes beckoning freedom and fun to the crowds of students scurrying-about underneath its animated patriotic luster. It's June 28th; they have survived another year. Mrs. Baker, Mister Gerber, Regents exams, and cafeteria food, are now history. Defiantly, the frowzy victors scorn the archaic dress-code and wear casual summer garb. Denim cut-off shorts are “in.” Some girls dare halter tops revealing ample breasts riding above tight, enticing midriffs, centered about a variety of different shaped belly buttons. Boys and girls—men and women—have won their freedom.

Everywhere one sees liberated teens. Their newly adopted anthem, “Sex, Drugs, Rock-and-Roll” is being played, by *The Who, Stones, Beatles, Airplane*, etc. But is this ragamuffin army academically proficient? Will they go to college? Achieve academic excellence?

Thankfully, the District Superintendent is happy as a pig in shit! Scores are up. Seven graduating ninth-graders are *Suma cum laude*. When Jack Russ took over, Dr. Abigail Cloud pulled her son out of private school and sent him here. A triumphant “high five!”

The boys are having “a field day” (the actual school Field-Day was canceled, the victim of budget cuts), ogling the girls. Returning flirtatious glances do not go to waste. Marsha Cohen gives a haughty looking student the once-over. Bob smiles, but tries to resist the beckoning body language. Sara is “the main squeeze,” who is at this moment, on her way to upstate New York and summer camp: *Have a good time till September, or will I loose you to a summer love?*

Bob, not Robert, in no way a budding Hippie, though his hair is deliberately disheveled—not greased back with a “little dab of *Brill creame*”—like his Mom likes it. For the first time ever, he comes to school in shorts. In them, Bob proudly displays muscular legs—steel pillars, forged in his very own weight room. He parades around in a WWII army shirt. Sergeant’s stripes are admired by all. No, Bob's Dad did not give him his old army garb. It's from his late Uncle, whose widow found it in a closet before she had to move. The war hero wanted his nephew, not his son to have it.

Master Sergeant Bob, Corp of Engineers, marches through the female-dominated cliques, with a head held high. Very high! No longer plebeian, but a newly self-elected Patrician, a gladiator whose bloody fights have earned his freedom! Bob Tracz seeks-out his best friend, who the night before, at his going-away-party, gave him the shorts as a parting gift. An elaborate-looking gift box contained dark-blue cotton, size 36 short-pants, that featured a hand-embroidered six-pointed star and a Christian Cross sewed on the corner of the right side.

Underneath the symbols, stitched in golden thread, in beautiful Gothic script, proudly appears his name.

“There just like the ones my father used to wear in his Kibbutz in 1948, Bob.”

“That was the year I was born. You also? I guess?” Murray, his best friend proudly speaks.

“It was when Israel won independence,” he answers, showing-off my knowledge of his country's history.

“Yes, for sure. I hope you wear them a lot. My Mom made them for you,” Murray proudly answers with a thick, flowing, European accent. English is still very much his adopted tongue, though after 10 months in New York, he's a walking dictionary of American slang and adolescent cursing.

“...guess this makes me an honorary Jew,” I haughtily reply, simultaneously laughing and semi-successfully holding back a deep sadness. “Well, I won't need the operation. It would hurt like a mother-fucker now,” Robert's desperately trying to lighten things up.

“Yes and no...there's a ...mohel in Tel Aviv--who may have done me! I hear that with a “snip,” “snip” *it's* gone before you know it. You might use a little trimming *Goi!*”

“Go fuck yourself and your mohel!” Bob replies, and starts chasing him. He covers his crotch with both hands, jumps up and down, playing, “catch me if you can.”

Our teenage bantering, vulgar, puerile, etc. is in a way, uniting two worlds--two cultures, and two very different human beings: I, the shy, sensitive, philosophic type, who happens to be Polish-American; and Murray: a short pugnacious, sly, proud little firecracker, who just happens to be an *Israeli*—not an American of Jewish decent. Our friendship, founded on a mutual love of the visual arts, blossomed, uniting a pair of reciprocating personalities, each giving what the other didn't possess, but secretly longed for. While the rest of kids are celebrating school's final end, Murray and I are in fact, quite despondent. We're both putting-on a pretty good act. Who will win the Academy Award today? *This day. A final valediction.*

Now that Bob spends so much time in the gym, the shorts will certainly be used. His Dad told him, that, Benny Leonard, the Jewish pro boxer, proudly displayed the six-pointed star on his trunks. Bob's not really Jewish. So what. *They* can be tough hombres. Bob already has shown what he is made of. He has a *rep*. Nobody would ever fuck with him, and he can get laid anytime he wants. But his best friend is leaving him.

So what can Bob give in return? Murray would love to have a rifle. But gun laws in Israel are impossible, even with a kid with connections. My *Catskill Mountain Landscape at Sunset* disappeared when the new teacher took over the art class. You can imagine my surprise when Harold, the head custodian presented it to me, rescuing it from a dumpster chock-full of discarded, worn textbooks. Sara has the copy Robert quickly painted for her hospital room. It should be retiled, *Catskill Mountain Sunrise*—it's glowing tints an optimistic portend of a life, now pregnant with opportunity and Hedonistic glee. Being more of a Turner than Rembrandt, painting professional-looking portraits is as yet, beyond his ability. But for a joke, he sketched a huge erect penis, a six-pointed star tattooed on it's foreskin on the opposite side. Sara's parents

spent big bucks on professional framing my picture; likewise, Bob spends a corresponding amount on my special gift for his best friend. The painting is securely wrapped-up in brown-paper, tied in a blue and white inch-wide ribbon. “You know what this is, “Pipsqueak, the proud artist asks,”

“Yeah! It is a picture you painted of my big fat cock, “Shooter” (the nickname Murray gave me after seeing the huge collection of weaponry I own).

“No! Numbskull! Good guess! It's *Hudson River Landscape*... I made it in Wohl's class. Remember that day? You kicked Burke's ass!

We hug yet again. “On the other side of the painting, you will.....” I all but stop my discourse, as the entire crowd bears witness to a sight they will never forget.

“Holey shit! Do you see what I see?” I whisper, incredulously, slowly, like I can't even believe my own eyes. The murmuring crowd has become silenced; the entire 8th grade, six hundred strong, stands open-mouthed, hypnotized by the sight that will never forget.

Mister Gerber is on his Honda motorcycle. He is wearing a plush burnt-orange Adidas warm-up suit. He's not sitting in his white 1970 Pontiac Grand Prix. Our homeroom teacher is piloting a brand-new, 1972 white and gold, Honda CB 350. He pushes his twin cylinder scooter to its limit. So far, no big deal. We've seen it before, many times. Weather permitting he often rides to school, parking his bike in the corridor adjacent to the Custodian's office. For keeping his eye on it, the accommodating head custodian gets a few extra bucks. With that money he feeds the pigeons and stray cats that he feels sorry for. Nice guy Harry. The way to go!

Gerber is not a nice guy. Nice people are supposed to ride Honda motorcycles. There's a TV add saying, *you meet the nicest people on a Honda*. Not Gerber. Even casually dressed, our *former* homeroom teacher radiates a "don't fuck with me" attitude. He sports a black beret, and is smoking a cigarette, rakishly jutting from a foot-long translucent amber-colored holder. We all wish he would have an accident or better still, encounter a skuzzy-looking enraged biker—a *Hell's Angel*.

Instead of leaving the hallowed grounds of I.S. 303 like a bat out of Hell, he stops at the back entrance door, turns off the ignition and waits. A well-dressed female figure leaves the building, a handkerchief in her hand. She appears to have been crying (in fact she was just told by acting Principal Jack Russ that she will not be able to return next semester). The pair hugs and kiss! Then they mount the Honda and ride past 600 peering pairs of eyes.

Today, a *real Hell's Angel* would add his awe and envy to Gerber's former students. Gerber carries a pretty female passenger, her naked arms, are tightly wrapped around his size 32 waist. A sleeve-less, silver-sequenced blouse, that appears one-size too small, stretches over a smallish, but certainly well-defined pair of breasts, whose spike-like nipples are proudly well-defined, not hidden. *Donna Karen* designs sexy clothes. The passenger's tight-ass fitting *Calvin's* show-off this chick's cherry-shaped derriere, which extends far beyond the bike's rear wheel: a trailing caboose, whose naughty anal cleavage could distract rubbernecking drivers, warranting a warning or even a traffic ticket from some gawking cop. "Wanna fuck me," vermillion-red Italian made (probably by Gucci) red pumps, featuring impossibly tall stiletto heels, are securely wedged around the Honda's well-used rear pegs.

A pale white face—as white as antique milk-glass, turns to the side and offers a captivating “Devil make care” smile. Her visage is partially eclipsed by strands of long black hair. Stone-black Italian-styled sunglasses offset a pair of scarlet lips, just covering perfect pear-like teeth. Smiling, she offers the awe-struck crowd a goodbye wave. Gerber gives us the finger!

“Oh My God! Holy mother F... It's Miss Hong!” *Our* Miss Hong! No! It can't be...”

The bikes mid-sized engine carries the pair away. There is a spooky silence. Gradually, a rustle of voices allows itself to be heard above the formally immobile teens. Was it really Miss Hong?

Sure it was. Student gossip about the pair was a main topic of conversation for months. They must be going to the beach. Gerber is covering his date's lithe little body with “Coppertone” suntan oil. The recombinant female, daring a barely-legal black string bikini, delights in the feel her date's large hands offerings. Where will the gentle, but firm, message lead? They have a large blanket. Not too many bathers around as yet. Maybe they'll dare some, “adult fun!” Will they decide to attend “Cap tree,” an officially sanctioned “nude beach.”?

Who amongst the still-in-shock 8th graders notices the tired-looking, slightly hunched-over head custodian lower the flag to half-mast? Then a rumor concerning the Principal dying begins to circulate. The flag tells the truth. Poor Mister Williams, the school's principal for eight years, has *drowned*!

After a certain time, the news of their leader's death quiets the crowd. But the main topic of conversation still involves what sexual positions Miss Hong and Gerber are likely to employ. But it's time for Murray and Bob to say “goodbye.”

Murray thinks he's going home on a commercial air liner: El Al flight 56, departing from Kennedy, 11am sharp. He's really going to Floyd-Bennett Field to take a military plane back to Tel Aviv. But the even greater surprise is his Dad's clandestine arrival, just minutes away from the school.

A stern-looking chauffeur leaves a parked limousine, beckoning with a wave. Yes, it's Mordechai, as stone-faced as usual. And considering what happened, I bet he's prepared for trouble. This would be the last chance for anyone to “get” the boy who he sworn to protect with his life.

“Better go. You'll miss your plane, ” I balefully pronounce. The Major is sitting in the back seat. His son is still unaware of his presence. I still don't give anything away. We embrace one last time. I add, “You know, we were a “Band of Brothers,” on Saint Crispin's Day.” With that, I hand over my paper-back very “used” Folger edition of Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth*. In school, we studied “Macbeth.” Since then, I read every one of the Bard's plays I could get my hands on. I pray my friend becomes another great Israeli general, not a loathsome, fallen, power-hungry tyrant. I know him enough to tell that he can go either way.

Major—now Lieutenant-colonel-- Rothstein, appears, his height-deprived figure clad in a clock-and-dagger styled gray trench coat. His hair is short—almost of crew-cut length. A pencil thin mustache, now pulled even thinner by a glee-filled smile, that I guess is very atypical. Murray sees him, runs with aplomb, finally embracing his Dad. Both shed tears of joy.

I leave them be. Maybe I'll never meet this very important man. Murray has told me just a little about his work. He's as tough as nails; his son is not certainly his clone, though the resemblance is obvious. Now they're just Dad and Son. They have a lot of catching-up to do.

Robert does not invade their privacy. *It's their time.* The car departs. "Goodbye Murray, my dearest friend. We could write a book...."

Robert walks home alone. But he's not lonely. And no cocksucker would dare chase him. He chooses to take the long way, through Forest Hills Gardens (*A Walk Through a Paradise Garden*), passing his late Uncle Joe's once opulent estate. The "For Sale" sign is still there, barely visible over the neglected sun-burnt lawn. Uncle Joe and Murray met only once, in Chinatown. They would have become great friends.

VI

Aim: What Does the Expression, "Mob Mentality" Mean?

Robert has been reborn. Murray was a catalyst, but it was the incident in Baker's classroom that saved his life in more ways than one.

Just stunned--not seriously hurt, Vinny slowly regains his feet-- his flashing eyes, shining like twin .45 caliber slugs visible in the rotary magazine of a six-shooter, are ready to spit vengeance onto Robert Tracz. Class 8-1 just adds fuel to the fire, urging them on. A mob is born.

VII

Aim: Is I.S. 303 A Blackboard Jungle?

Superficially, I.S. 303 appears to be about as far away from a “Blackboard Jungle” or Roman arena as one could get. Nestled in an affluent prosperous neighborhood that is predominately Jewish, achieving high grades, not physical safety, is still the main concern. At that time, in the city's massive system, there are only a few such schools that can honestly boast this. Candidly, the main reason is that the school is still “Lilly White.” There is not one Black or Hispanic face to be seen amongst the near two thousand students. Fights are rare—class room brawls--just never happen.

Next term, will this end? Black kids bussed from the district's worst schools in South Jamaica will take their rightful place in the super-competitive student body, many of whom will become doctors, lawyers, and C.P.A.'s. The only minority now rubbing shoulders with the Jews of P.S. 303 is a Christian one: Irish, Italians, Germans, Greeks, and a spattering of Slavic kids, collectively numbering about one hundred. A few are “social undesirables,” who have been thrown-out of Catholic and secular private school. But on the whole, like the Hebrew majority, most are hard working and obedient.

These “gentiles” are a “prejudiced” lot who by and large regard Jews with suspicion and envy. Gradually the youngsters experience what their parents warned about: Jews are a clannish bunch, always get the best grades, flaunting the best clothes, and dominate social activity. Their only social intercourse with our kind is with the blond-blue-eyed bombshell Scandinavian girls, or with the budding Sophia Lauren-types Italians. Jewish girls seem to see them as role-models, and the Jewish boys use social intercourse as a means to “intercourse.” Any Jew-boy parading around with his “shikse” is envied by his clan and despised by ours. Most Jewish girls treat us

Christian boys as complete non-entities. Hostilities rarely break-out. Ethnic slurs may be whispered, not ever heard. But the tension between the groups is thick enough to cut with a knife.

Social Studies class is the one public forum where both groups are allowed to a voice an opinion about anything. But it's yet again, a *Regents* class, so Mr. Smith must curtail the sometimes lively political discussions that show how stereotypical and divided the two groups really are. In 8-1, it's four vs. twenty four, and the teacher often has to use verbal cattle prods to get the non-Jewish kids to participate. They're either too shy or so inured to being beaten down by the extroverted majority. They don't bother to raise their hands. Are our basically conservative political leanings labeled as "Neo-Nazi."? Do Jews think our priests and ministers remind their kids that *their* people killed Christ? And worst of all, are Christians inherently "racists," hating all people of color?

As a whole, we non-Jews feel left out, misunderstood-mislabeled, and basically inferior to the surrounding population. Will Black kids feel the same too?

When forced integration does arrive, will it affect the Jewish-Christian hostility? Will Black students from Ghetto schools be greeted with open arms? Possessing reading and math skills years behind the White kids, will they successfully compete against the super-competitive, college-bound majority?

Most of the gentiles can't wait to see what will happen when minorities arrive. Will the Jewish kids be just as *prejudiced* as us Christians? Will nasty, Black kids extort money: "...all I

find I keep,” beat-up white kids, and only socialize amongst themselves? Will “bullying”--now Black against White, become a unwanted reality?

VII

Aim: What is Social Darwinism? Will The Meek Inherit the Earth?

Of course, New York City's Board of Ed. Circa 1970, never officially sanctions the strong praying upon the weak in any of its hundreds of schools. Now, almost half a century later, every school board in the land universally condemns what was once tolerated, ignored. There have been too many *Columbines* and *Sandy Hook's* reminding us that even the “best” schools are social institutions harboring psychologically disturbed youngsters, who could eventually unleash their macabre revenge. I have no idea if the tragically troubled souls wielding assault rifles were bullies or the bullied. But I confess that if *I* carried a pocket knife to Mrs. Baker's Class, *I* would have buried it inside the small of Vincent's back. And who knows? If I had the shotgun, would I have used it? As it turned-out, just hitting my tormentor with a book was enough. What happened next wasn't my fault. *No one listened.* Tragically, how many bullied students continue to suffer in silence, seeing their lives ruined, not being allowed to find their place in the sun? How many commit suicide? How many grow-up into seriously damaged adults? Can schools ever be free of the strong praying on the weak? Can schools really offer sanctuary from a world that is, after all, not equally divided in any conceivable way?

Maybe it started in archaic Sparta, whose inhabitants thought it morally correct to expose fragile newborns to certain death rather than to let them earn a place amongst the military elite.

Move on a couple of millennia to Victorian England. Thomas Hughes publishes, *Tom Brown's School Days*, a novel realistically depicting “public school” life, where upper class men are encouraged to harass younger students in an officially sanctioned system known as “fagging.” The bully here is named “Flashman,” choosing young Tom his fag, who must adopt a slave-like demeanor. The factotum must polish his master's boots, help him dress, just like a typical British man-servant. But Flashman is not content. He gleefully administers corporal punishment on the not always submissive freshmen, who is finally pushed to the edge.

Tom owns a winning steeple chase ticket that the villain wants. Flashman finally sets him on fire after he refuses to turn over this cherished piece of property. Tom's constant companion, a street-smart, lower-class boy, resorts to clever chicanery to defeat the bully. Dr. Arnold, the actual master of Rugby school (and father of the gifted poet, Matthew Arnold) promises future reforms, his hands being tied by this tradition that produced strong English gentlemen, who by their strength and cunning fostered in this atmosphere, built and administered Britain's world-wide empire. If a student could survive the rigorous academic demands, and officially encouraged bullying, he was on his way to take his place amongst the upper class, now prepared to enjoy the good life. He has *earned* the title, *Gentleman*.

All “bullied” students suffer terribly. They see their school as a concentration camp, a torture chamber, a Roman arena. The teachers and administration are usually ill-prepared to deal with the misguided ruffians who torment the “Plebeian” weaklings who usually occupy the unimportant fringes of academic life. In P.S. 303, in the early Seventies, success in gaining excellent grades is paramount. *Only when bullying disrupts classroom routine will action be taken.*

But these tormentors are a clever lot. They rely upon a series of little tortures that rarely rock the educational boat. Mister Russ is not the only one who has been hoodwinked by these clever, nasty miscreants.

VI

Aim: What is an Israeli Jew? What is a Super-Jew?

If anything can cause excitement in P.S. 303, it's the arrival of fifteen boys from Israel. They arrived just a day after opening day, on Tuesday, about two weeks before Robert slammed Vincent with the book. These young teenagers have been sent from home to temporarily reside with relatives in the States. A full-scale Arab-Israeli war could brake-out any time. Too young for military service, they all would rather be firing a 9mm Uzi rather than recoding inane lessons in Queens, New York. They pray for the day when they will be old enough to return home to join the tough Israeli Army. Resentful of their situation, appearing to carrying, "chips on their shoulders", these young firebrands are not the stereotypical docile American Hebrew. Belonging to a stricter religious sect than their American relatives (most of whom are labeled "Reform"), they have little respect for those who don't follow traditional dietary laws and those who can not recall basic Hebrew prayers and ritual. Their American cousins are total anathema before them, and maybe before God. The Americans financially support Israel, but would they shed their blood if the war beaks-out?

Assistant Principal Jack Russ has a lot to worry about. Already, too many incidents of fighting have been reported. They defiantly arrive late to class, smoke cigarettes in front of the school, and believe it or not, sexually harass female students. Their favorite ploy is to use the

shoulder-to-shoulder crowding during passing to jostle pretty coeds, sometimes daring to “cop a feel.” Now, fondling the enticing buttocks, as the book-burdened enticing coed meanders through the throng, is gaining popularity. Shockingly, not one girl has ever complained. Jack has seen with his own eyes how the “victim's” initial embarrassment transforms to delight-laden glee.

But just last period, Mrs. Carter, on hall patrol, witnessed a girl who slapped one of the Israeli boys. He then pushed her to the ground, and then offered her his hand, gently helping her up. After dusting her off and picking up her books, he seemed to offer some kind of apology. They both told the concerned pedagogue it was nothing: “No big deal.” Nevertheless, Mrs. Carter takes their names. Both students leave the bustling hall, walking side-by-side, hand-in-hand, following the “yellow brick road”. Jack Russ is informed. The girl, Sara Kurtz is a model student, the boy is yet again, “Little Murray Rothstein, who has amassed quite a dossier, and will soon have his very own section in his, “Problem Student” file. The astute A.P. knows that when confronted with a written record of a student’s indiscretions, parents will be on the defensive, the finger-pointing and blame not targeted at him. He knows Murray's Dad is in Israel; he also is personally acquainted with his present guardian, Mrs. Ida Stern, whose two daughters were certainly no angels. But this little kid....

VII

Aim: Who is Major Jonathon Amal Rothstein?

At the exact moment when Murray grabbed Sara's pretty little ass, Jonathon Amal Rothstein wonders how's his number one son is doing in his new school. Methodical research has

discovered that it is a Jewish enclave, possessing high academic standards, and temporarily, devoid of low-class Negroes. The principal is an idiot, but his assistant is competent, and runs the school. The major's sister is purchasing school supplies, knowing what tools the boy will need. The major has also failed to inform her of his son's escalating problems. Years of letters exchanged between the two have centered about his son's unique personality. Alice is sympathetic, but openly hints at the boy's father as a partial cause, "He's a feisty little bush that can't grow under a great tree," she writes. Fine! Maybe he will blossom better in New York? She accepts the boy, full of hope and a slight, natural trepidation. She owes her brother her life. He arranged for her families immigration from warn-torn Belgium to Israel and then New York. After all, how bad can a little boy be?

Bad! He has had it "up to here" with his Murray's shenanigans. His position as a major in Israeli Army Intelligence Corp requires sixteen hour days, leaving little time to deal constant phone calls, meetings with principals and school psychologists. He's so busy he sends his wife and daughters, not to New York, but to Poland. They will be the guests of a Christian family who, at considerable risk, concealed Jews from the Nazi menace during the Holocaust. What is "Black September" when compared with the Gestapo knocking at your door. There is a newly rebuilt synagogue in the town of Lodz, and a growing repopulation of Jews. He reads that things are going well. Sure! Murray isn't there. With an inward chuckle he puts the letter aside, shaking his head sideways. The major soliloquizes. "The Polish people have suffered so much he would never unleash *him* on them! But the Americans, his sister..." "May God forgive me!"

Muslim terrorism is a reality that all Jews face, especially families of government officials; so some opt to temporally send their loved-ones away. The major is so important that

his request for agents who will shadow his oldest son while in New York, is gladly granted. While his family is still in Tel Aviv, they are under constant surveillance anyway. It was a pair of these “guardian angels” who discovered the clever little boy (who, from time to time, gives them shit-fits, performing numerous disappearing acts) in the back of a vacant VW buss, having sex with a willing adolescent girl. Why did she have to be his bosses' daughter?--General Ariel Sharon!

VIII

Aim: Who Slayed Goliath? David or Murray Rothstein?

Not reaching the height of four-foot eleven, weighing a mere 95 pounds, no one who plays, studies, or just pals around with Murray Rothstein would ever call him “little” to his face. They would be a Philistine, a Goliath. He would become David.

If Biblical accounts of the legendary King are true, our Murray could be a possible reincarnation. Firstly, Rothstein is a natural leader. The 15-year-old, not ready to clad amour and stand affront a mighty Hebrew military force, he is forced to be content with winning the admiration and respect of schoolmates, playmates, etc.—many physically “older.” In all possible other ways, Murray's maturity is a key that unlocks the door to the pleasures of the adult world—a world that all adolescents, whatever the nationality, crave for.

Is there one Legendary Israeli king who has not been infatuated with the opposite sex? The pages of the *Old Testament* sometimes read like they were written by Ian Fleming, Harold Robbins, or even Arthur Miller. Little Murray's knowledge of scripture is impressive. His vivid

imagination conjures-up erotic scenarios, where the silken-robed “King Murray,” is smoking a hookah, nestled in his harem of scantily-clad beauties.

Sometimes rough-cast and crude, when it comes to dealing with females, the King appears suave and debonair, making them feel like queens, who pay homage to this beguiling, obsequious knave. He has striking good looks: jet black hair naturally arranged in a disciplined formation of curls, resembling the marble locks crowning statues of Apollo. But he's no Greek—solidly Semitic. Imagine a very young *Omar Sharif*. They both have, Sex-appeal, *mesheekhah*, in Hebrew.

Puberty transforms child-like infatuations into carnal lust. He has chalked-up numerous conquests, seeing sex has a natural God-given right. He recites the “Song of Songs” as a class project in school. Not bad for a fifteen-year- old.

He is academically and athletically precocious. Is he deeply religious? Murray sheds alligator tears when touring Masada, and continues to be so distraught even days after the visit. Maybe he's more aware of his Jewish nationality, rather than the age-old wisdom he studies in the Torah. In any case, his “religiosity” does not interfere with a metamorphosis into a twisted, self-aggrandized, “loose cannon,” who is finding that living as a de facto adult, just too exciting—too much fun!

His sexual exploits are gaining notoriety. He has impregnated a teen-age girl and a woman in her middle twenties. His frequent disappearances, where he plays, “hide and seek” with the Secret Service, usually ending in the seedier section of Tel Av-iv, where the prostitutes reward him with discount rates. In one foray, he catches the clap, a serious case of Gonorrhea

that renders him hospital bound; and upon returning home suffers, by his father's hand, the first and only beating he has ever experienced.. He appears to temporarily reform, successfully concealing his now minor indiscretions from everybody. He is excited about America. His father prays that his precocious little boy will not embarrass his family. He also prays he will give his Jewish Dick, a nice long rest.

Almost immediately, upon arriving in the hallowed halls of his new school—a college preparatory school-- he achieves movie star status. There's Superman and now, *Super-Jew* !

Murray has accomplished in fifteen school days what it usually takes his American students a full-year to accomplish. His formally pristine loose-leaf appears so worn that it appears to have been rescued from a fire-fight on the Golan Heights. There are only a few sheets of tattered paper sandwiched between the three-inch thick blue binder. He rarely copies a lesson, relying on his photographic memory that has earned him passing grades, so far. He doodles and draws constantly. His masterpiece may be that binder—every inch covered with six-pointed stars; daggers dripping with blood; ominous mushroom-shaped clouds, accurately rendered weapons and tanks, and Hebrew lettering, that is in fact, bits and pieces of war-slogans chanted by troops on their way to the front.

He reads in the New York papers about something called, the *Jewish Defense League*. His aunt and most of his classmates and teachers consider them a dangerous, gun-happy, “lunatic fringe.” No, Aunt Ida will not take him to their meetings. No, she will not sew their logo (a clinched fist in front of a six-pointed star) on to his gym uniform. Rabbi Meyer Kahane becomes his idol.

In the student cafeteria, while devouring his favorite Kosher sandwich: very lean Pastrami and freshly sliced brisket, and maybe with a schmeer of dark deli-style mustard, all encased in a freshly-baked seeded roll. Even at rest, enjoying a respite, he carefully scans his surroundings. He makes mental notes as to where every teacher on lunch patrol is situated. Murray, a pretty-good chess player, knows that he must be aware of the enemy's ranks and files. When he plays his game, he usually Checkmates his adult opponents. The prize today is of course, a pretty girl.

There are girls to the left of him, girls to the right of him... big ones, short ones, blondes, and brunettes. Schools back home afforded many more opportunities to mix and mingle. There were dancing classes, social clubs, nature walks. It was common place to witness public displays of affection before and after school. Gym classes were coed; boys could nestle next to their girlfriends in the lunch room. Exactly how many kids in their early teens were sexually active is a matter of conjecture. Maybe a nation on the brink of war wants to see their kids grow into men and women as fast as possible.

What this school's administration wants their kids to mature into is obvious: sexless robots who ace Regents exams. Murray would be correct in guessing that most haven't exchanged even a kiss with a fellow student. He is shocked to discover that boys are not informed as to the details of female anatomy. On the boy's side of the cafeteria benches, there is endless debate on just how and where a girl manages to pee. There are no sex education classes. Boy's "Hygiene", taught by gym teachers concentrate on drug abuse, No one would dare to raise any questions about sex.

There's a national sexual revolution! *Time* and *Newsday* feature cover stories informing frumpy middle-aged Americans that their off-springs are screwing-around. It's the *Age of Aqueous*: guilt-less sex, drugs, commune living (Israeli kibbutz), blasting Rock-n-roll. Will 14 and 15 year-old kids race to grow-up? How many will be virgins till marriage?

These kids are going to grow-up, like it or not-- really fast. Too fast! The majority are not clever enough acting-out a series of orchestrated charades, featuring scenarios that use maturity or immaturity to ultimately, "getting what they want." They make mistakes: abortions, drug-related, police records, not doing well in school, etc. In a way, they are as emotionally fragile as the "bullied" students, whose plight is of no interest to them. Both groups are riding a merry-go-round that will, sooner or later, end in a dead heat. Who graduates 9th grade with out scars. Murray has no intention of getting hurt.

Little Murray Rothstein, the master thespian, can turn it on and off on a whim. Maybe being Janus-faced is in realty, adulthood incarnate. How does a boy-man who has an eye for the ladies, play his cards in a school that semi-successfully tries to deny sex? No one can prevent him from "socializing" in the school yard before line-up. Not one of the chatty females ever sends him packing when he makes his move. He starts by making the girls feel sorry for the brave Israeli people. He brags about his knowledge of weapons and martial arts. When questioned about Israeli girls, he notes their toughness (they can drafted into military service), but American girls are much more attractive. They sense that he has been around, but his devilish smile, good looks and short stature render him too cute to be true. When he says that he has the hots for Barbara Streisand, the super star who all the girls worship, Murray is in like Flynn. He has fondled, felt, kissed about a dozen willing partners in two weeks. A good start. But he aims

high, setting his sights on the leader of the cheerleader squad: the tall, blond, happy-go-lucky, naturally flirtatious goddess that is worshiped as the prettiest coed around: *Merrill Greenbaum*. His friends from Israel are taking bets on how long it will take him to get into her pants.

Back in the lunch room, when he finishes devouring his genuine Kosher Pastrami Sandwich, he starts drawing. When that bores him, he will see what rules he can break. Sitting where *he* wants to—not to where he is assigned, is a logical first move. *Knight to King's bishop three.*

The object in chess is to immobilize and possibly capture the opponent's queen. Today he sees a pretty young "Queen" just begging to be captured. "Sit next to me," beckons Sara Kurtz. The same *stacked* young lady who Principal Williams pinched in the ass. Murray rates her 7 out of 10. Merrill is a 10+. "Come on down," the foxy girl beckons. There is no space next to her, even for this pint-sized Romeo's skinny little ass. Someone has to go. Murray puts his food down, gets up, pointing to a vacant seat at another table. The handsome, tall, 8th grader who just dared to leave his assigned seat to be next to Sara is frozen with fear. Stewart Kaufman has seen the Israeli in action before. He slowly rises, taking sideways baby steps, out of sight, out of mind.

Now twenty-odd pairs of eyes are fixated on the Murray and Sara. They're chatting and looking over Murray's portfolio of drawings. Mister Russ, who runs the lunch room with an iron fist, would never allow anyone changing places. He is not here now. So Murray, always aware of adults who put him under surveillance, knows he can get away with it. For now he has impressed Sara with his total disrespect for authority. Sara's ass gets pinched again.

IX

Aim: Has the Jewish Mafia—"The Kosher Nosta", Arrived at P.S. 303?

These boys from Israel are causing quite a stir. There's only one Murray, but the entire group are not what they expected. They're making their own rules, getting away with a lot of shit. They isolate themselves, only becoming friendly when it suits their interests. They're not good kids, not *typical Jews*. They have been too many complaints issued from the faculty and disquieting letters from concerned parents. When Jack Russ tells the principal that the students are calling the Israelite clan, "The Jewish Mafia," the head man chuckles, turns off the Met game, being broadcasted by Radio WOR from Shea Stadium(only two or three miles away from the school), and offers the A.P. a cup of freshly-brewed coffee.

"Don't worry about it, Jack. I'm on it. They are all earning excellent grades. It's natural that they stick together. Poor kids. Up-rooted. A strange land, a new culture. Given time, they' all make the honor role, even passing the Regents exams."

"Yeah... I'm not so sure.... My teachers complain of open hostility: late to class, not doing assignments... There's been fighting and *sexual harassment* that I have witnessed with my own eyes. There's a boy in my office right now that felt-up a girl and punched another kid's lights out."

Jack has chosen his words carefully. Aware that any discipline problems of a sexual nature could shatter the apparent tranquility of this unique school, he drops this bombshell in his bosses lap. For two years he has been content to handle things alone. His position does not entitle him to have a secretary. He's overwhelmed with tons of paperwork and a myriad of other

administrative jobs, besides the snowballing discipline problems. He has a few friends at *110 Livingston Street*. They pull a few strings and arrange for a Dean of Discipline to be appointed *next term*. After all, Ghetto-hardened, low-income minorities will sit side by side with affluent, college-bound white kids. There's bound to be trouble, and no one man can handle it.

Of course, Jack Russ is grateful. In the future, he knows that favors must be returned. But being a hard-headed pragmatist, he is concerned with the here and now. There are some 160 school days left to get through. He'll be dammed if he'll let all the shit pile-up at his door. The principal is an indolent, self-aggrandizing, politically appointed ass-hole, whom he totally despises. He listens to baseball games all day and rarely leaves his office—an office that looks more like a room in the *Baseball Hall of Fame*, rather than an enclave of wisdom and pedagogical power. When he does work, with the help of his secretary, he juggles meaningless statistics he's collecting for some book he's going to write when he retires. The new text books that are so badly needed are in storage, waiting for the Principal to redo the necessary paperwork he botched-up several times.

When he gets tired of numbers or when his team is off, he'll stick his bald head out of his door and invites a few pretty coeds to share his daily ration of bagels and coffee. Sara is the first coed he lost control over. Sometimes he contemplates the increasing difficulties that his formally plush job is placing before him. He can not get the pretty Sara out of his mind.

Jack Russ is so fed-up he almost submits his emergency medical sabbatical papers to the board. Not surprisingly, he has a bad case of ulcers. But he also has a conscience. If he lets the rotten structure fall on Williams' head, the kids—these basically good kids—will fall by the

wayside. He'll stick it out a while longer; and who knows, one of the many resumes he sends to Bethpage, Port Jefferson, New Rochelle, etc. will eventually pan-out.

“Sexual harassment. Yes. Well maybe. Did any of the girls really complain? Any phone calls? Any letters to the D.O.? The Israeli boys are just “feeling their oats...” Williams answers, with a tepid authority.

“They're feeling more than that! Jesus Christ, I saw it myself! Next time, some kid may go just too far. One complaint, one irate parent, and the shits going to hit the fan! Jack pleads, while he tries to get the principal to read his written reports. Both agree that more vigorous hall patrols may help. Then Jack says that he will bring the matter up at the next faculty meeting.

“No Jack, not a good idea. I don't want to ruffle any feathers, so to speak. I'll talk to the staff on an individual basis. I know my people. I don't want the new kids to get the feeling their being pushed around.”

With that Jack Russ leaves, secretly giving his boss the finger. Williams, not a man who wastes food, invites another pretty pair of coeds to help him polish-off the bagels. Time for a Seventh-inning stretch.

XI

Aim: Why Does Everyone Enjoy Art?

Success in art will not promise a ticket into the promised land of a six-figure income, but is nevertheless, very popular amongst the little masters of grammatical syntax and quadratic equations. Budget restraints in other schools, have often caused art and music classes to be

reduced to pencil and paper and a temporary mastery of the kazoo. But not in P.S. 303! The Jewish parents, an enlightened bunch value culture *almost* as much as academic success; after all, another Pealman or Marc Chagall may be waiting in the wings!

The very pregnant Mrs. Ester Wohl-- a master teacher, who knows how to get the most out of every student, will be missed when she goes on maternity leave. Her condition reminds her students that their maturing bodies are too ripe for procreation. The boys and girls are mesmerized by her girth, as she waddles up and down the aisles, helping her students with this and that. Even the most unmotivated students (usually the academically, not visually gifted) try their best for her. They gladly acquiesce to her demands. If the class becomes unruly, she forces them to write the rules again and again. She always has a ream of white-ruled paper in her desk. They paint, not write.

8-1's first project has come to an end. It's the usual, "What I did on my Summer Vacation," affair. It's time to critique the results, with all the budding artists encouraged to offer praise and criticism. Some offer pretty nice renderings of sail boats, water-skiing, sports at summer camps, etc. Robert overcomes his terrible shyness and offers obvious pointers. Mrs. Wohl stays in the background, almost letting *her best student* run the critique. Little does she know of the explosive animosity harboring inside the dolice-looking boy. In the academic subjects, Robert is just mediocre. He knows his skills are not valued when compared with the academic disciplines. But this is Robert's place to shine—his chosen road—and he milks it for all its worth.

It's Robert's turn to show his work off. The super-star art student rises, hoisting his water-color high above his head: *Catskill Mountain Lake at Sun-Set*. A deep purple sky, shimmering

with touches of yellow ocher, is giving way to an inviting array of shadows. Underneath, a placid lake reflects the setting sun that glows like a bar of gold. In the middle is a small row boat that holds a person fishing, and a little dog-- black, tan and white, sitting at his master's side. A Beagle? There is perspective, chiaroscuro. A hand is raised. "But Mrs. Wohl, isn't it supposed to be about summer vacation?" some wise-ass comments. The teacher answers, "Robert's family owns a cottage on this lake. He told me he fishes there. Right, Robert?" "Yes, I also own guns and hunt," he whispers to himself. He better not brag about his gun collection. He has plans...

In a rare oversight, Mrs. Wohl has miscalculated her allotted time. She is aware that our class is now going to lunch, so she can ask for volunteers to put away the pictures, clean-up brushes, paint, etc. Of course Robert's hand goes up. A few girls will also stay, and the new kid from Israel offers too. Vinny and his side-kick, James Burke—both a little "fucked-up," from their morning toke of marijuana—are in the hall, waiting. Vincent feels slighted because nobody went gag-hag over his painting.

The Israeli kid's name is Murray, who also likes to draw. Tomorrow we will look at his, "Summer Vacation" painting. But he can't wait, and wants to know what this Robert kid thinks right now.

"Boy, that's real neat!" Robert sincerely responds. His eyes expand upon viewing what is quite a scene: a battlefield covered with mutilated soldiers, tanks and exploding pill-boxes in the distance. Smack in the middle stands a tower (resembling the Brueghel masterpiece *The Tower of Babel*) on which a six-pointed star proudly shines. Robert studies the unique loose-leaf, which is covered with similar imagery.

“I can help you make your tanks more realistic.” With that, Robert grabs some scrape paper and uses his innate masterly knowledge of perspective, to produce a 3-D image of a tank that looks like it could spit-out a 90 millimeter shell in the viewer's face. Robert doesn't forget to put a Star-of-David on the futuristic-looking tank's turret.

“Wow!” *You are good*, Robert. Is “Bob,” used too?”

“Yep! My *friends* call me *Bob*. Like my drawing? A mere bag of shells!” *Bob* responds, “Hey! Maybe Mr. Russ will let us sit together in the lunch room. I can show you...”

Yeah! *We'll* sit together. Don't worry,” he replies, putting his hand around Bob's waist, acting like he has found a long lost brother.

Robert, *Bob* to his real friends, like everyone else, doesn't know what to make of this “little” kid. This Murray refuses to stand-up and recite his lessons in Spanish, comes late to all his classes, and constantly pals-around with the pretty girls. But Bob has made a friend-- his first in almost a year.

The art teacher thanks us, and with a hurriedly scribbled late- pass firmly in hand, we leave for lunch. Waiting outside is Robert's Nemesis, along with his six-foot-high friend. The Mick trips Robert, and he falls on the dirty floor. Murray who is right next to Robert, compresses his body like a tiger ready to pounce. He leaps on the sneering, nasty-looking giant. His fist meets Burke's nose with an audible “crunch,” echoing through the hall, sounding like a ping-pong ball bouncing in a large cavernous space. Burke falls to the ground, moaning; his hands making a vain attempt to stop the spewing blood. Vincent runs away. His head protrudes from

the adjacent bathroom, almost looking like a rubbernecking driver who has just seen a bad accident. He's going to have to do something about this cock-sucking little Jew.

“Come on Robert—I mean Bob. It's time for lunch. Can't wait to see your stuff. Murray tells his brand-new friend, *Bob*—just like nothing happened at all.

XII

Aim: Who Are Suitable Role Models For a Young Israeli Student Staying in New York?

My Dad, after a hard-day's work takes his chair at the head of super table. Usually he is too exhausted to talk. But once in a while he will start another hate-filled diatribe directed toward someone having to do with his construction work. We all take it in, usually agreeing that the “lousy wop,” or the “rotten Chinamen” are going to Hell. When finished we all retreat to our plush finished basement for a dose of nighttime TV. With elbow on his head, our Dad lies on his favorite couch and watches the 7 PM News, sitcoms like *Barney Miller*, and if he's lucky *Gunsmoke* or *Have Gun will Travel*. Often, the phone rings and dutifully, he rises to conduct after-hour business. He deliberately shouts, making it difficult for us to watch our T.V. Shows. Along with the nomenclature of the building trade, we are treated to more vial language and racial epithets, spawned from the melting pot called, “The Lower East Side.”

On Saturday's I often earn a few bucks helping him with his carpentry repairs that he labels, “little shits”. On other Saturdays the family will be at their upstate home, where our crude father accepts the duties and comforts of a country squire.

We pick-up the B53 bus in front of “Willies,” the Jewish-owned candy store on Metropolitan Avenue, travel through Middle Village, Maspeth and enter Williamsburg, Brooklyn, home of a host of notorious Jewish racketeers, many Hasidim, and the best freshly-baked bagels in the city.

Once in a while, Mom goes along in the family car, usually to go shopping downtown, where good deals abound, especially if the buyer personally knows the seller. Great bagels are as commonplace as dry goods offered in the non-obstructive little family stores, still boasting Hebrew lettering that appears at least a century old. But my Dad, by now burdened down with packages of underwear, socks, and all sorts of practical goodies, begs to make yet another stop in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, on the way home.

In the middle 70’s, this section of the massive city could be mistaken for a turn-of-the-century Eastern European Ghetto. Hasidim are everywhere. On the Sabbath, black and white prayer shawls, beaver-lined hats, long beards and paces, remind of Wausau, not Brooklyn, New York. We are obviously not Jewish. Walking through the throng of religious was like being in a time machine. No one acknowledged our presence. If we were interlopers, no one expressed uneasiness. We stop at a narrow side street, where we are greeted with the tell-tale aroma: Bagels! The bakery sits unobtrusively in an old dilapidated commercial factory of some sort. Upon crossing the door-less threshold, flanked by large windows covered with dirt and grime, we are overwhelmed—almost attacked, by a curtain of heat, so intense, it makes the summer noonday sun feel like a block of ice. Our progress is stopped by a green countertop constructed of green-painted wood that seems about 100 years old. An ancient golden cash register glitters like a golden idol. We wait, expecting a denizen from Hell to greet us; instead we are left

waiting, still uncomfortable in the stiffening heat. Since no door is there to impede our progress, we venture a peek into the bakery proper. Huge ovens are tended by five or six young men, naked to the waist. Their bodies glowing with sweat. Boiling caldrons of hot water produce a deafening hum. Everywhere on the old brick walls, reflected flames lick and dance, rendering the entire scene as painted with pure vermillion pigment. Dante himself would be impressed by this Inferno.

Finally, a baker towels himself off and greets us with an ear-to-ear grin. Another cash customer, but even better, a Beautiful Polish shiske is standing in front of him. Mom expresses compassion as to their toil in the heat. David, a handsome-looking 20-year-old, with the body of a gymnast, can't get his eyes off the angelic vision before him. If Dad is jealous, he does not reveal it; rather he translates the Yiddish-English dialogue that my brother and I gather is pretty racy. According to David, it gets even hotter, where the bakers sometimes strip to g-strings and even work bare-ass in the August heat. The Polish Angel and her brood leave with a paper bag loaded with the best bagels in the world. This time, no charge: "On the boys!"

My Mother's visits to this world were extremely rare. Dad hated driving and parking was impossible. So Dad and I take a ride on city bus, the B-53. We leave Queens, enter Brooklyn, where the sight of canal barges and the industrial clutter inform the passenger that Brooklyn is a city on its own. We reach Bridge Plaza, transfer to another bus that takes us to the Williamsburg Bridge, treats us to views of the East River, featuring the famous Brooklyn Navy Yard. Finally we leave the bus and walk a short distance to Delancey Street, where Dad's business—his shop, is located. He is constantly greeted by many of the denizens who inhabit these cobble stoned streets, on which step the feet of the rich, the poor, the Jew, the gentile. I'm

fucking impressed! My Dad knows everybody! We have omelets at his favorite Restaurant, *Ratners*, and say hello to, “Papa Frankie,” an elderly semi-retired, small-time mafia hood who runs an Italian “social club” right next store.

Today is a special day. My new “best friend” will be in Chinatown about noon-time. His aunt promised Murray that if he was good, she would take him there. Not at all interested in Chinese food or culture, Murray wants to really explore “Little Italy” the adjacent neighborhood, hosting “Umberto's Clam Bar,” the sight of a real Mafia-style rub-out reported by all the media. We rendezvous on Mott Street. His aunt is conveniently temporarily lost. I shoot my mouth off, bragging that my Dad knows *real gangsters*.

As fate would have it, standing right in front of 66 Mott Street, a restaurant my Dad recently renovated, is his elder brother, my Uncle Joe. Diminutive in stature, slightly hunched over, immobile except for his arm hoisting a smoking cigarette He is dressed somewhat casually, but tastefully--with opened collar, pressed pants, and shiny comfortable-looking loafers. With a peaceful continence and a smile reminiscent of the Buddha, his sad eyes seem to comment on the basic misery inherent in the human condition. That may be so, but he is also aware that he owes considerable amounts of money to restaurant proprietors, fellow building contractors, and construction workers, who constantly seek him out. He uses his wits and angelic demeanor to indefinitely postpone his obligations. “See me on Tuesday,” is a favorite ploy. Today is Tuesday, and he will not part with what little he has left this day or any other. My father always said, “The bubble is going to bust!” It did. Many of the high-class antiques once gracing his mansion in *Forest Hills Gardens* are now being cherished by his brother—my Dad-- the “Wood Carpenter.” He wisely stayed away from fast money schemes. He did rather well on his chosen path: a

beautiful wife, a country home, two sons—one who became a fine teacher, the other who retired a NYPD police sergeant.

It's certain my beleaguered uncle doesn't owe the man standing next to him, one red cent. “Big Bill” Hong, who was recently interviewed by a WPIX reporter in reference to his “alleged” gangland activities, has no problem collecting money owed to him. The massive six-foot-six Chin-amen--a devout Buddhist, can usually be found on this street corner at this time. His birth is the product of a scandalous relationship between a prosperous Chinese merchant and a French prostitute, so he is not purely Oriental. He meditates daily—the essence of Buddhism, challenging enough in a monastery, almost impossible in “the real world.” Periodically, this genuine gangster leaves Chinatown, finding solace offered by a community of monks in Woodstock, New York.

Memories from his past nevertheless invaded his meditations: the chaos of WWII, the, “Rape of Nan king,” The six-year-old child was forced to watch his father's decapitation at the hands of the savage Japanese. Somehow, his Mom escaped and set-up shop in one Asian city after another, just keeping ahead of the invading hordes. Finally, the cosmopolitan city of Hong Kong was chosen as a permanent home. Bill's mother, still beautiful--stately tall, alluring and seductive—and with a “head on her shoulders,” went into business again, rejected hordes of suitors, employing courtesans from all over the world. As her intelligent son's physical stature grew, so did his abilities to run the business. His mother died (probably from syphilis) leaving behind a nice nest-egg that her wayward son ostentatiously spent. Some of her legacy went to pay for the torture-assassination of two Japanese businessmen who escaped war crimes prosecution for their alleged involvement with the Nan king horrors. With an army of creditors

chasing him, he changed his name to Hong, immigrating almost penniless to San Francisco. His dubious pedigree rendered him a social outcast amongst many of the pure-bred Chinese: so with the help of a long-lost relative, he arrived in New York in 1967, making a living as a waiter and cook. By 1972, he became the most know man in Chinatown—head of the Hip Sing Association (in reality a Chinese Tong), an always generous philanthropist, and a real hard-ass gangster.

Impeccably dressed, sporting a solid black, expensive-looking full-length overcoat, a nicely brushed gray fedora hat, protecting a dome as smooth as a monk's shaved head. “Big Bill” admitted on local T.V. News, that in the past he was sometimes a bad boy (but never convicted of anything more than a misdemeanor) and was now committing himself to the eightfold path toward enlightenment, and charitable pursuits, culminating in his partial sponsorship of a new Theravada Buddhist temple in *Confucius Square*. Just yesterday, Murray and I saw the interview on Channel 9 WOR Evening news.

Out of the hustle and bustle of the tourist-dominated Saturday crowd, a running figure appears and gestures to my Dad. A meeting with this man was the major reason Steve Tracz gave up another trip to his upstate home. In his early twenties, wearing a short brown leather jacket, he could almost be a Pizza delivery boy, politely meandering through the crowd. This is Mike de Stefino, who lives on Little Italy's Mullbury Street. He often employs my Dad for odd-and-ends carpentry work. “Thanks Steve. Nice job! I'll take care of you Monday,” he almost sings in a near-perfect lyric tenor voice. He seems to be acquainted with Uncle Joe and Big Bill.

“Don't worry about it, Mike. Any job for your Mom is a favor,” my Dad proudly answers. He then introduces us. “This is my son, Bob, the artist and his friend from Israel, Murray.” We all shake hands.

“Things getting pretty hot there, son,” my Uncle suddenly pontificates.”

“Yes sir. I can't wait to go back and kill an Arab,” Murray answers with pride.

“You'll a little young for that my boy,” Big Bill announces, as the group chuckles in genuine admiration for the little guy's spunk and candor. The giant man becomes a little pensive. Maybe Bill is recalling his first killing of another human being?

We discuss the explosive situation in the Middle East, and Murray provides interesting side notes. He wisely leaves-out any reference to his father's job. “Just stay in school and do your best,” the final note issued by a genuine Mafia hit-man. He, “Big Bill” and Uncle Joe talk a bit more, and in a flash, all disappear, allowing them selves to be engulfed into the throng that is uniquely “Chinatown.”

My Dad is pleased as punch. Murray appears awe-struck, and I feel like an important dude. Aunt Ida appears, and her nephew still begs to see more. Dad gives directions to “Little Italy,” and we part company. After a few more appointments, Dad leads me to the IRT subway station, situated under a massive Roman arch that supports the city's *Municipal Building*.

Together, Dad and I descend down the stairs and buy our tokens. In front of the main token booth is standing a nervous-looking rotund man, who has “Jewish” printed all over him. This is Michael Rubin, a building inspector whom my Dad has bribed on numerous occasions. It's an open secret that the entire staff of inspectors inhabiting the Municipal Building's Department of Buildings, can be bought. It's only after a major building collapses, that headline-greedy reporters makes enough noise to temporarily stop the pay-offs.

Mister Rubin likes to go deer hunting. And he will hunt this fall—along with five or six inspectors, who my father has in his pocket—an added bonus for the violations they, “take care of” for my Dad's clients. He knows me since we were in the woods together last hunting season. His obesity hinders his staking ability, so Dad places him at a nearby post, a meadow adjacent to our cabin, hoping he gets a shot. He would rather see one his friend’s bag a deer rather than his son. Disappointed hunters are not good business. Dad slips him some money. We say goodbye, and finally start back to Queens.

After its underground journey through Brooklyn, the IRT 1 train, finishes its two-mile run atop an elevated track situated just yards away from open tenement windows. Everyone in the train seems asleep; I am the only one peeking out wanting to see some interesting, “slice of life” that an open sash may reveal. No topless beauties, no married couples engaging in coitus. Nothing exciting at all. Dad's not asleep, drawing upon a cigarette. He reads the racing results in the “Daily News.” Last stop! He throws the rowed-up paper on the seat, and points to a new building under construction. “That must be the new “Christ the King” High School I've been reading about lately, Dad.” I inquire.

“Do you want to go there,” he asks?

“Maybe. But Mom isn't very keen on Catholic schools. Remember how she told us about the beatings, the humiliations. Public school was paradise. She never missed a day.”

“But you don't like the little Jew-boys in... what's your school's name...”

“I.S. 303. Well, yes and no. Murray is a super-Jew, my best friend. If I go to Christ the King, will the Irish and Italians welcome me, a Pollack? Like Mom says, there's good in bad in

all people. You deal with all kinds of people in your job. Ray Angelini, another builder, the guy you call a “wop” is your best friend, and that Rubin dude is a hunting partner. Right?”

“Yeah sure. I just want you to be happy son. You say Hebs are putting you down.”

Dad is now digging into his pockets, fishing for exact change for the awaiting bus. He discards the remains of his *Old Gold* brand cigarette that he has been secretly smoking in the half-deserted car. “And by the way, is Mister Rubin going to hunt with us again after what happened?” Steve's animated son inquires.

“He's a very important connection, Bob. I'll make sure he doesn't mistake me for a deer and fire a round at me again! *Thank God Jew hunters can't hit the side of a barn.*”

His last observation causes me to confront a whole pile of shit. When do ethnic stereotypes cease being harmless banter? Are they ever really *harmless to begin with*? Norman Lear entertains millions of Americans with his lovable bigot, *Archie Bunker*. Archie uses epithets like “Jungle Bunnies” and “African Bush-beaters”—never *Nigger*. Jews are Hebs or Yids, never *Kikes*. Is the Jewish prejudice against Christians understandable? Forgivable? Can my friend Murray call me a dumb Pollack, but not a Dirty Pollack?

If I do go to a Catholic High, will I “be with my own kind?” Will the Irish and Italians put this Pole through the ringer? Will I encounter prejudice there? Can schools really stop attitudes that are born and bred over the supper table?

What Murray did for me outside Wohl's art room was an act of *friendship*. As the school year progressed, we had our falling outs here and there. But we remained friends. When the

chips were down, there was nothing we would not have done for each other. When my Dad put down all Jewish hunters, he crossed the line. If Mister Rubin can or can not hunt has nothing to do with his nationality. I bet the Jewish soldiers entrenched in the Golan Heights, can shoot “the eyes out of a squirrel” like my Dad and I. Is the friendship cherished by Murray and Bob something so unique? Isn’t school supposed to teach that one should judge people on their character, not their ethnic background? Has I.S. 303 failed again in not promoting this singular paramount objective?

I didn't realize it then, but this friendship was forcing me to see all people as individuals. Now at the supper table, when Dad refers to Murray as “the little Jew-boy,” I ask him to stop. *“He is my friend.”*

Every evening we talk on the phone. “So Murray, you have just met Big Bill Hong. He's the head of the infamous Hip-Sing Tong that controls all of Chinatown’s crime: drugs, loan-sharking, extortion—the whole ball of wax. The Ginny is a Mafia torpedo you wouldn't want to mess with. He is at least a part-time body guard in the Lucasi crime family.

How is it possible that a 15-year-old-boy know about the daily workings of serious criminals? My Dad tells a lot, but just read the papers! Watch the local news. When New Yorkers get bored with televised sports, they follow the colorful exploits of their real criminal neighbors—not powder-puff dons seeking, “floating crap games,” innocuously pictured in Loesser's Broadway hit, *Guys and Dolls*.

“No shit. Your Uncle Joe too?” Murray inquires, transfixed by my narration.

“That's another story. He's no mobster, but he's getting into trouble with the Feds. He's a character. I think he really likes you. I have to take you over to see his pace. You wanted to meet some real New York racketeers...”

“Bob, I can't understand how you can let that little cock-sucking Nazi mother-fucker to push you around. Your Dad...knows...”

“Knows what? Who? So what! This is school—not the streets of New York. I wish you *really* knew my Mom and Dad--Really knew them!” I hang-up, very upset, the previous nights diner conversation an all-too tangible reality haunting my memory over 50 years later.

XIII

Aim: Why Can't Bob's Mom and Dad Prevent The Bullying In School?

“My god, you were in the principal's office! You didn't get into trouble, Bob?” my mother inquires. This is an incident that yet again involves my savage harassment by as my Dad would say, “that little German cock-sucker”. But now, *I am called to the office*. I tell my parents about what happened outside the art room-- risking transforming a pleasant meal into another hate-filled quagmire. But this time, it's not Dad's problems being addressed, but his oldest son's. This could be my golden opportunity. The bullying should have been addressed. But instead, my frightened parents are worried about *me* getting into trouble.

“No Mom. I was not in the Principal's office. We were in Mister Russ's office. Mister Williams did come in.” This is the first time I actually saw the scholarly-looking man whose

quiet demeanor, slightly balding head, and wire-framed “granny-glasses” put him in direct contrast to his ever-present assistant, resembling the late President JFK.

“Well, Vincent's friend, a kid named Burke, tripped me. My friend, a Jewish kid from Israel, broke his nose!”

“Was he suspended?” my mother inquires.

I don't know. Maybe a day or two. In school. His aunt has to come to school.”

“*Do I have to come?*” Mother answers with disquieting alarm.

“I don't think so. But Mom, please come in and tell Mister Russ what Vinny is doing to me. I can't take it anymore. God, I wish I could of punched-out both of them.

“But your heart condition, Bob.”

Just the night before, our usual dinner-time conversation that sometimes started out on a positive note, always descending into negativity, remained hopeful, positive for a change.

Born with a heart defect known as aortic stenosis (closing of the heart valve), my heart can not pump enough blood on exertion. In elementary school, at recess, I gleefully played dodge ball with the best of them. Outside, I rode my bike like a “bat out of Hell.” But the semi-military based physical ed. classes in middle school are just too much. I just can't run, and jump fast enough. I am only a little over-weight—no more than a majority of my classmates-- but I am the target of intense, merciless ridicule. My loud-mouthed gym teacher, Mr. Greg, in a surprising moment of compassion and tenderness, took me aside, pronouncing, “You know, son. This is not

for you.” I was exiled to a study hall, sitting alone, deprived of a very necessary rite of passage that does help change boys into men.

It would be years till Federal edits would require *all students* to have access to a modified physical ed. program. When I became a teacher, I would sometimes substitute in these classes. I tried my best to instruct and coach these brave human beings, who discovered inner-strength, struggling to do their best, often catching a shiny star that the majority of “normal” students never try to reach.

“Mom, didn't my doctor say that I was O.K.? It would be a long time before my heart would need an operation—a new valve? I could take gym if I wanted to,” I added with gleeful hope.

“But Bob, didn't they make fun of you?”

“But Doctor Reppert said if I loose weight...”

Easier said then done. But this time I'm serious. I'll do it! No more perogi, golabki, kielbasa, etc. And no more starch-laden spaghetti, Lasagna, and fettuccine Alfredo (Pollacks love guinea-food too). On Saturdays, when Dad fries-up a sizzling sirloin steak, I weigh my 6-once slice on my newly bought weight watchers scale. *I loose fifteen pounds.*

At school, instead of going to study hall, I seek-out Mr. Greg, the gym teacher. He notices my transformation: “Son, you're born again hard!” While I hand him my doctor's note allowing a return to his class; he bellows in his usual tone, “O.K. son. I'll go easy with you.”

The question is, will my classmates do the same, or continue to treat me as they have been?

XIII

“Aim: Does Natural Talent Really Exist?”

I enter the boy’s locker room with an understandable trepidation. My greatest fear is not the class itself, but dressing-undressing in the ridiculously short time given to change into gym shorts, tee-shirt, sneakers, and an tight-ass fitting, jock-strap--“protecting the family jewels.”

All the guys engage in penis-peeking. We want to see how we stack-up against the competition. During the whirlwind of transformation from scholarly-looking over-weight kids, to semi-inept semi-adult overweight athletes, we eye each others' “private parts”. Everyone is circumcised, even the non-Jewish kids. Todler is the one exception. And as far as size goes, my family jewels out-shine most. No one really thinks about queers, fagots, etc. invading our masculine domain. But everyone of us horny little devils imagine in what various states of undress are the gum-chewing, pretty coeds stripping in their locker room, just behind the tiled wall.

Hooray! I am not the last boy to finish changing! I join the running procession of would-be athletes seeking the challenges of the gymnasium. Murray arrived very late, in a tizzy, almost bursting from the seams, wanting to tell me something. Shit! He must be in trouble, again. Now in uniform (his tee-shirt adorned with, The Jewish Defense League logo, that we painted together) He grabs my shoulder, pulls my head next to his, and whispers, “Happy Birthday, Robert (He always calls me “Robert” when he's serious about something).

“It's not my birthday. You know that. What the....”

“You're getting your present *now*, big boy! Look at your watch. At exactly 11:15, go to the bathroom. Don't pee. There's a door hidden by boxes. Open it and wait! If the fire alarm goes off, we're fucked. But it won't.”

“Fire alarm! You little fuck! You're going to burn the fucking place down? Oh. I get it! It's your cover-up for a drug deal! I'm not getting involved with fucking drugs...” I cry, breaking away from his grasp.

“I promise shit head. Not that. And I don't think the alarm will go off. Just go there at 11:15!” In fact, back in Israel, one of his Father's “business associates” exchanged a certain address in the red light district of Tel Aviv, for a quick course in electronics. Murray learned about disconnecting alums.

“Yeah! I guess. But what about you? You're fucking late, kid. Greg will have your ass on a stick.”

“Fuck him. I'll give him the *Lost Jew* routine—works every time: 'Sorry teacher, I got the girl's and boy's locker room mixed up.’” He gives me a pat on my ass, runs to his locker and gives me one last look. I can still see that face transformed into an impish diabolical, mask, featuring an ear-to-grin. It became a life-affirming, imaginary impish specter that has become a “lifesaver” rescuing me from the doldrums of depression when my path became difficult.

But at that time, October 23, 1972, I'm still not doing what Murray wants. No way! And then, an Israeli kid, named Samuel, I think—one of the three others placed in 8-1, leaves the

John, looks into my nervous eyes, and says, “Do you know how much Murray loves you? He would never hurt you, Robert. Do what he says. *Now!*”

11:01AM. Remember, this is my first day back to gym class. Nervous as shit, still plagued by insecurities, but now with a friend in my corner. Can I do the warm-up calisthenics? Can I learn how to shoot baskets? Can I remember my *Master* combination lock number? Murray can't help with those. But I dare any cock-sucking mother-fucker to try to trip me! Go ahead. I dare you! And now I have to something that could be very bad.

The games are about to begin. Seated cross-legged on my spot in the middle of the second row, I'm finally, *just another boy*. It's about time. Greg hands me the clipboard and asks *me* to take attendance, something of an honor. Murray finally shows-up, and I must mark him as late. Vinny and Burke are not, thank god, present today. I gleefully put red marks next to their names. Our task will to be to sharpen our basketball skills, and according to Gregg, there are really no skills to sharpen at all. “It was a sad day for I.S. 303 when they invented basketball,” continuing his diatribe. He scolds us on our collective UN-physical fitness. Most can't do one pull-up on the bars; only a few can accomplish ten push-ups. Our basketball team is a joke (how many sitting there contemplates the glaring fact there are no minority kids on the team). He praises the Israeli boys, whose strength and toughness are putting us to shame. This Rothstein kid can even mount the rings and almost do an “Iron Cross.”

We are divided into 6-kid groups. Robert and five others try their hand at shooting foul shots. “Boys, this is the only *free* thing you will ever get in the game of basketball,” Greg declares. This is the first time Robert has ever had a real B-BALL in his hands. Not a beach ball, a dodge ball, volleyball. It's heavy. Its textured bumpy surface invites a caress, a spin, a bounce.

“You're a South Paw, Tracz,” the approving teacher notes. After a few clumsy dribbles and practice throws against the wall, Robert bends his knees, squares his body to the backboard, venturing a shot. “All net!” a classmate cries. Then three in a row! My classmate's jealousy is apparent. The forth shot dances around the rim, but doesn't go in. Instead of handing the ball to the next shooter, I throw it right at his chest! He barely makes the catch, lowers his head, and tries his shot. A miss! I'm the only one who even made a basket! I'm actually having fun—so much fun, I totally forget about taking a pee at the appointed time. Murray has not forgotten. In a flash, he leaves his group (learning how to dribble), passes me and winks his eye.

“....Tracz...Who taught you that...,” the pleased as punch” Coach just had to ask.

“No one Sir. Like shooting a gun...*natural talent* I guess.”

The future *Center* of the rejuvenated, racially integrated, school basketball team enters the bathroom really wanting to pee. Bob's so dam nervous, urination is impossible. With my zipper only half closed, I seek-out the hidden corridor that is my goal. Behind a pile of dusty boxes and worm gym mates is an old steel door. It seems to be unlocked. I move the pile enough to barely squeeze through. A dark, semi-illuminated corridor stacked with broken equipment and custodial odds and ends, barely becomes visible. At its end, another door awaits. Stenciled in bright red paint are the words, “OPENING WILL SET-OFF ALARM,” A sliver of noonday light revels that the door is indeed slightly ajar. There is no alarm going off. A faint sound of auto traffic invades the hollow empty, forgotten space.

A hand—a pretty, delicate feminine hand, sporting long pointed nails, perfectly decorated in a modish pink, appears from the outside. The sudden blinding sunlight hurts Robert's eyes, but

does not prevent the future star athlete perceiving an hourglass-shaped feminine figure silhouetted against the glare. She could almost be an angel, beckoning forth the beatific vision. But the interloper is indeed just a girl, clad in an, “official” I.S. 303 gym uniform: royal blue bloomers, white cotton blouse, and short white *Keds* sneakers. This coed prefers anklet socks rather than the heavy knee-highs that offer some protection from an errant field hockey stick. Circling one bare ankle is a thread-thin gold chain, from which a row of miniature gold hearts are hung, like garland on a Christmas tree. They dance up and down in response to movements that are graceful and athletic. No rings on her fingers, but a shinny silver watch graces her left wrist.

She sees me right away, nods; and then slowly, carefully, lets the heavy door close, shutting out the sun and unwanted guests. Now, harsh yellowish illumination from one naked incandescent bulb, reveals an Aphrodite-like head--as sublime as anything chiseled from white Parian marble by the Greek sculptor Praxiteles. The visage is framed by long blond hair styled into a perfect pageboy. You might say, she's a teenaged Christie Brinkley-- Billy Joe's *Uptown Girl*. She's fun loving, not stuck up, radiating a femininity that enjoys every minute of being a girl—a very beautiful girl. “You're *here*! Great!” In a giggly, girlish, genuinely overtly friendly tone, she continues. “Little Murray tells me it's your birthday, Robert. We decided to give you something.” I'm Merrill. 'not in any of your classes. But Murray told me all about you, Bob. Don't be nervous.”

Ohmygod! Merrill Greenbaum, the goddess-- prettiest girl in the whole fucking school. Here? Now? I must be dreaming! Over our heads, maybe only just ten feet above, bouncing basketballs, running feet, and shouting boys are very audible. My stomach is in knots. If I get caught...

Merrill nervously glances at her watch; with a sly smile whispers, “Come on Bob, we don't have much time.” Her bright, sky-blue eyes devoid of any encircling make-up, radiate keen intelligence, capable of a piercing stare as well as beckoning seduction, vulnerably. In short quick movements, her rotating head makes 180-degree turns, acting like a submarine's periscope looking for enemy destroyers. God, is her gym teacher, Miss Joya, hiding in the shadows? Is Greg here too?

I can't help breaking-out in laughter. “That's it Bob. Lighten-up! Murray says you're too serious. Lighten up *my* Big Boy!”

“I was just imagining our gym teachers hiding in the equipment closet, ready to pounce on us.”

“They'll never notice we're missing if we get our asses moving. If they do, we'll try plan B....I'd give you a joint, but I know you never toked before. Ask Murray *baby* for some pot. You'll love getting high. A real turn-on. First time, no, not *now* kid. You could go ape-shit or something. Let's sit over here.”

My eyes follow her glances, picking up a tell-tale litter trail covering the dusty floor. A dozen or so half--consumed marijuana joints lie scattered between boxes and tattered volleyball nets. Three used condoms, still appearing moist, are in plain sight. Is this her private hide-a-way, or does half the school know about what's going on? As if reading my thoughts, she raises her shoulders, communicating a vague lackadaisical attitude about the past. She's used to living for the moment.

All this time, her jaw has been moving up and down, chewing gum like a farmer's little prize-winning cow. Then at once, in a very business-like-- almost masculine manner, spits-out her load like she was shooting a bullet from her mouth. I can't help but to laugh! Her very funny,

very-non feminine, business-like preparation is another turn on. Merrill is a flesh-and-blood alluring goddess, soon my “Uptown Girl”?

She smiles, takes my arm and leads me in the direction of a four-foot high half-dilapidated cardboard box. Then the temptress, still in a gym uniform, with a wave and a nod, invites Bob to sit side-by-side with her. Bob obeys. Our combined weight just about collapses the large frail cardboard container. We both share another laugh, now finding that our two butts are tightly squeezed together by this accommodating junk-filled box. I'm still nervous, but not a wreck; she seems totally relaxed, not at all worried about being caught. Hope we can get our asses out of the temporally prison-like cardboard.

I have never been so physically close to a girl. Only yesterday it seems, Mom gave me a quarter, I looked both ways, crossed my street, bought five candy bars at “Willie’s,” the local candy store, scampered home, played with my toys, and slept like a baby. Now, my entire body yearns to possess a girl. I have never seen a naked female, except in “Playboy” magazines. My knowledge of the female reproduction system is based on line drawings I secretly view in “The Family Physician,” part of the “World Scope” encyclopedia my parents purchased as a basic educational tool. In retrospect, I realize the constant torment my very adult body experiences while being in close vicinity to 15-year-old girls, was much worse than anything Vincent Todler ever put me through. Murray is giving me a *Milkyway* candy bar. He knows his friend has a sweet-tooth. It's now time for me to explore a fresh new galaxy-- nougat, caramel, milk chocolate. Bon Appetite!

Still squeezed together, nestled side by side, with one hand, my tall companion finds the back of Bob's head, gently slowly moving my face so close to hers, we are now eye-to-eye. Our

lips unite and her greedy tongue explores my mouth. She commands the fingers of her other hand to walk-up my thigh. Freeing the right hand from my neck, she UN-zippers my pants, pulls off my strap and sucks my erect penis with her mouth, only stopping to rub her hands up and down and around my now pulsating member. Her tongue zeros-in on my glans, the most sensitive skin my circumcision revealed. Gentle, experienced hands fondle my balls (the medical book called them testicles, or gonads), then she raises my cock and sucks on the scrotum, being careful not to cause any hurt. She leaves the site, but not before she gently pinches the sack, pulling on the curly pubic hairs.

The master teacher postpones her pupil's ejaculation. Now a pair of gorgeous, impossibly long lanky legs are spread far apart, her gym shorts now a rolled-up in a tight ball inhabiting only the bottom of her left leg, the one with the jingling gold hearts gracing her little ankle. Pretty pink panties are conspicuously absent. There is no underwear. Are the other girls scampering around the girl's gym with only one single piece of cloth hiding their sweating pair-shaped teenage girly butts? Would the boys “get hard” if allowed to view the anal cleavage, if a pair of bloomers, fell to the gym's shinny floor?

A huge mound of dark-blond public hair stares at me. Not pure blond, but still a golden-haired mound, nevertheless. I need no invitation to caress the entire area, though I must confess, her ample breasts, still shrouded by an ample bra, could have been a first choice. Her “pussy” hairs are surprising rough—just as rough as mine. My sweating hands engulf the forest, daring push and pull motions that jump-start her hips that gyrate in a circular motion as if possessed by some primal force. Her head lies back, eyes closed, her mouth opened, as Merrill appears to be grasping for air. Her golden hair is almost touching the dusty cement floor. My index finger

travels up and down her pubis, till it discovers a long moist furrow, hiding behind her curly crop. It penetrates to her vaginal opening that I repeatedly invade, feeling a ribbed area, culminating in a cone-shaped mound that must be the cervix.

I stretch and rub the inside of her liquid-soaked vagina, remembering a “Cosmopolitan” article that gave details on something called a “G spot.” It drives her wild, (in math class. I'm constantly challenged to solve for “X.” I'm getting an A+ for solving for “G”!), but suddenly pulls my greedy hand away. She grabs my hair, moving my head over her hairy mound, and gives a command: “use your tongue on my clit, Robert.” That must be the little flap of skin my index finger felt moments before. Robert's nose is filling with her vaginal odor that repels and attracts the teenage lover, who so far, has made practical use of his theoretical *knowledge* of the sex act. The odor reaching his nostrils is a like a primal invisible cloud, evoking ancient copulations experienced by millions of primitive organisms, inexorably reproducing their kind in the pure-Devonian sea. But I allow my tongue to dig deep and caress the little mound. My tongue tires, so I allow my lips to suck and pull on raised flap of skin. I feel a tinny knot-like ball. I give it all my attention. The surrounding furrow swells, stiffens, and initiates a pulsating rapture, reaching every inch of Merrill's aching body. “I'm not hurting you, Merrill?” I inquire, worrying about an action that may have caused pain, not pleasure.

“*That one* was right down to my toes. Shit, *no*. You made me come big boy!” Totally exhausted, wearing a satisfied grin, she says, “You must have had some, “on the job training. You were supposed to be “inexperienced,” giggling yet again.

“*Just natural talent*, I guess,” putting on a causal-looking facial expression.

We're not quite finished. Are we? Any overly inquisitive gym teacher entering this love next just would risk being decked by yours truly. But we are still alone.

Merrill pulls out a box of "Trojan", ready-rolled latex condoms, that someone discreetly placed under a cardboard box marked "Attention: R. Greg." Now we're both standing, eye to eye for a second time. How long ago was our first embrace?

Her body now immobile, her lust-filled eyes, seemingly transfixed on my blood-engorged member, dark red, bent a bit to the right. Appearing almost like a super-hot magician's assistant, her perfectly shaped legs girdled in fish-net stockings, then summons another magic trick. A single condom is released from the little square red box. The rolled-up, per-lubricated plastic glove now dangles from her finger tips. It appears about eight inches long, with a little jutting tip saturated with a fluid that must be some kind of lanolin. It should make a tight fit. Her hands find my shaft, and with some careful manipulation, pulls the transparent latex over my glans, foreskin and finally over my throbbing red shaft. The blood-filled veins appear even larger through the plastic semi-opaque window. Now Merrill places her arms on a waist-high box, and slowly bends at the waste. Her breasts, still encased in a bra, are nevertheless maddening enticing.

The sound of a slamming door coming from god knows where, is too close for comfort. With a "Quick, "put it in," demanded by her, I approach a godly-shaped derriere. Delta-shaped anal cleavage, resulting in two ample, fatty ass-cheeks stare at me, beckoning a little slap. I give the left cheek a pretty good hit! She giggles. I almost want to shout, "Now Merrill, you have been a very bad girl..." With my shorts wrapped around my ankles, I shuffle over, holding my pulsating dick like a divining rod. I bend over her and cuff my hands over her dangling boobs. "No Bob! Not now, No time...Put it in!" But where? Then I see the dark skin lips of her vulva

and a crop of hair underneath her wonderful butt. I spread my legs, so my penis will in parallel alignment with her pussy's lips. But the door appears closed. In vain, my member tries to open the flaps of skin. Giggling like a school girl, her left hand finds my shaft, placing it inside her.

My hips thrust deep, pulling out slowly--and then again and again. The sight of my shaft's motion almost hypnotizes me. My ass cheeks tighten. I thrust deeper, faster. Merrill is cooing like a love-sick dove. Then, in a series of spasms my entire being explodes into her. My penis is now my only reality. Intense, primal pleasure-- I feel the hot flowing semen pushing through my urethra-- ejaculating in four or five blissful spasms. If I could utter words, it would be, "Oh My God."

It's over. Bob got his birthday present alright. He's been willingly robbed of his virginity. Is he now a man?

We're both panting like over-heated puppies. Later, I will read in one of many sex manuals, that we preformed intercourse "Doggie Style." I offer a tender loving kiss that she returns. We quickly dress, the used moist, condom joins the others on the floor. Merrill left a small towel for me to clean-up with. This girl doesn't leave loose ends.

"I almost let you fuck me in the ass, Bob. But you're so fucking big, it may of hurt me. And your first time-- should be the way we "did it."

"Was I really O.K." I ask?

“ O.K.” ? I haven't been laid like that for a long time. You're like an alley cat, my boy. Your girl friends will be lucky....” I want to ask if she ever “did it” with Murray. Wisely, I decide not to go there. At least for now.

Time for a reality check. It's funny. Everything is the same; everything is different. I have made love to a beautiful girl. Or was this “sex”--pure and simple? What about Merrill and me? Over? Do I possess the social skills necessary to win a female on my own? Adult questions to be sure. Maybe it's easier being a kid, my biggest problem surviving in this rotten school. “Manhood” has tapped me on my shoulder. Do I have to leave my entire former self in a ditch as I follow my destined path? Well, in any case, I will never be content with only toys and candy bars again.

Merrill leaves with a last wave of her hand, firmly shutting the rickety door leading to the outside world. I'm sure she will have a good line of shit to give her gym teacher. Maybe being a creative liar is one adult skill I must learn very quickly. Happily, I still hear thumping sneakers, bouncing balls, etc. right above my head. Do I clean-up the mess, or just leave it? I see the empty pack of Trojans on the floor and put it in my pocket. A trophy perhaps? Then I see a square object that appears to be some kind of book. I pick it up! My god, it's a “flip book!” My thumb animates its pages, creating a moving picture of a couple having sex. Is it Merrill's? I take it, not realizing the future consequences.

I pray that Greg thinks I'm still taking a crap. How long have I been gone? Do I dare to just casually return? Finding the door that leads to the john is easy. I peek in. Shit! There's somebody taking a wiz. Luckily, it's another Israeli boy. He wouldn't turn me in. Sure enough, with a happy grin, Sammy guides me back into the bathroom, and then we both replace the boxes

and junk hiding the door. We reenter the gym, I pull-up my fly and feign a soar-looking countenance on my face. “Have a problem, Tracz,” Greg asks?

“Well, yes sir, my stomach, a bit queasy.”

“You can sit this one out if you like, son.”

“No sir. I want to play. I'm O.K.” I pinch myself. Ouch! It wasn't a fucking dream. Greg gives me a wink! *God, could he know?*

IV

Aim: Who is Vincent Helmuth Todler? What Does the Word 'Sadism' Mean?

Vincent lost his virginity last year at Lutheran summer camp. Unfortunately for him, being a C.I. T. (counselor in training) didn't warrant another chance with the camp's director: bad enough that the girl was only twelve; bad enough that both partners were drinking beer and high on maharaja, and bad enough that Vincent showed no remorse. He was asked to leave mid-term; his father slapped him silly in front of the girl's mother. Two weeks later, fires partially burned down several equipment-filled sheds. When Fire Marshals appeared at 34-76 Manse Street, Vincent's father provided an air-tight alibi. His son was cutting lawns all day with him (Vincent's Dad is a landscaper). The hate-filled boy paid a friend to commit the arson. He duped the police, the camp, and his father.

Vincent, or “Vinny,” owns a family history very atypical of those found in I.S. 303. He may be the only Lutheran-German in his grade. The Jewish kids suspect he's a Nazi. He's not, though he hates Jews and Blacks with a passion. The Todler family's supper-time diatribes are

conspicuously devoid of Jew-baiting. Helmuth Todler, the owner of a very prosperous landscaping business, lost his father and two uncles on the Russian front. Many of his cousins and aunts perished in allied bombing raids. He hates the memory of Hitler and what he did to his Germany. He is deeply embarrassed that another brother, living in Miller Place, Long Island, *is* an active Nazi, the head of a perverted, beer-guzzling group of malcontents who are carefully watched by the local police and the F.B. I. A real “Lunatic Fringe,” They received a visit from the Fire Marshals when the day-camp went ablaze.

If Helmuth Todler is cursed with a tragic flaw, it maybe the total, unequivocal blind faith he has in his only son: A fine, bright, Aryan-looking, athletic boy in grammar school, a young man temporarily led astray by a Jezebel he could not resist. His new school will be the ideal environment for a new beginning. After a year or so there, the Lutheran-German community will open their arms, and take him back.

After a year in his new school, the German community is not quite ready to take him back. Athletically, he excels. Of medium height and built, blessed with superior strength and coordination, he flaunts a heroic body, whose well-defined thorax could serve for a model for Roman breast-plate armor—a *cuirasse esthetique* in French. Vinny hates the fact that there is no football, baseball or even soccer teams to join. It's only that “Nigger” sport, basketball--and only that. He is made captain of a losing team. He hates the Black opponents whose height and street-smart tactics make mince-meat of his little Jew-boys. At one particularly humiliating effort, he cleverly finds out where the visiting team's coach car is parked. With an ice-pick, he gives it four flat tires.

Vinnie's face could have been modeled for any number of German Wehrmacht recruitment posters. If indeed, a hackney National Socialist artist could mechanically reproduce Vincent's square jaw, blue eyes, perfectly set nose, etc, could he “catch” the primal viciousness, masked behind a beguiling grin that gets him out of trouble with adults and captivates a long line of teenage girls?

After a few months in school, the torpidity of his environment begins to get to him. He throws away his loose leaf binder, preferring to carry a spiral notebook that he decorates with crude 3-D crosses and, hearts impaled by daggers. He sees Robert's drawings and asks for help. They discover things in common. Both like to draw, both feel left-out of the Jewish mainstream, and both despise the Spanish teacher: “The Nigger, fuck-face bitch”, as Vincent calls her.

As time passes, the friendship wanes. The German-American is taking a far different path than his mild, “sissy” friend. Vinny sells pot to a plethora of eager customers, and performs malicious acts, “just for the Hell of it.” A cherry bomb explodes in a toilet bowl; kids are pushed or tripped in the halls; Mr. Williams' car is spray-painted yellow. He's never caught!

And then the Kraut bastard starts picking on Robert, never once ever being held accountable for his ever-escalating sadism. But now, this little Jew-boy from Israel must be dealt with very soon. Todler has plans...

V

AIM: What Started the Fight In Mrs. Baker's Spanish Class?

The day of the *incident*, sees the usually sneaky Vincent Todler, totally out of form. He doesn't feel like waiting any longer. Murray and Robert are constant companions. He wouldn't dare to fight them together. He'll take the book from Robert right now! Gambling that he will comply with his demand, he forsakes his little torments and dares a classroom spectacle. Instead of sitting down, he marches to Robert's seat, placing his hands on the corners of his desk; his shoulders forming an oblique triangle carrying his handsomely chiseled blond, blue-eyed menacing visage. I feel the heat and the putrid odor of his breath. I hold back vomiting. Mrs. Carter, the teacher of *Spanish 2A*, is unbelievably oblivious to the confrontation. Her back, silhouetted against the blackboard, while she continues to produce perfect script describing today's lesson in Spanish grammar.

VI

Why Is Mrs Anita Baker So Mean?

Mrs. Anita Baker, a late-middle-aged black woman and veteran teacher, having survived Harlem, the South Bronx, and South Jamaica, Queens, enjoys the comparative docility of this middle school nestled in an almost perfect suburban environment. Just yesterday, Mister Williams, the school's principal, reveals the district's busing plans. He has a proposition. "Why not accept the new position of Dean? You' will be working with Jack. Have your own office, dealing with discipline and only discipline. You will be dealing with your, "own kind".

His implied racial slur hits Anita like a ton of bricks. *Own Kind?* That racist asshole!...She has suspected that the school would soon no longer be *Lily White*; and she does

possess the ambition to accept a new challenge before she retires. He tells her boss, she'll think about it. And she does-- constantly. *Own Kind!*

His offer triggers an inexorable inner dialogue, posing as yet, unanswerable questions. Is one of the three minority teachers on staff “working hard or hardly working?” Compared to South Jamaica, this place is paradise. Has she earned the right to “coast”? Being a dean will end all this for sure. She has not one iota of respect for her principal, seeing him as a frightened Ostrich who can't cope with docile white kids, no less an invasion of Ghetto-hardened Blacks. She has suspected his racism from day one. His incompetence has caused things to get unraveled, but her skills could turn it around. Let's see what happens. *Own kind?*

In the meantime, she continues to play her pedagogical part, as she continues to don an unapproachable frown, appearing in a stately assortment of gray and black Armani suits-- advertising imperial impenetrable power. The masterpiece of her regalia is a Louis Vuitton handbag that she lovingly sets on the window side of her geometrically arranged desk. Her years in Jamaica have taught that if anything is placed on the opposite side, (the door side) it could be ripped -off in a flash. This current \$1200 item is a ten-year-old replacement for the one stolen from her desk in P.S. 40—disparagingly called *40 Projects*. Her six grade class, lined-up outside, was waiting for her to take them to the lunch room. Anita went to her personal closet to use the mirror to adjust her make-up. And then: Swoosh! Some kid grabbed her bag! Out the door! Those little black bastards got her “Louise”! No little Jew or another jungle bunny is going to get her “Louis” again!

It was a nightmare loosing her wallet--enough to drive her to drink, which she does, in school, all day. Why? Is she just as bored with school as her kids are? Is that why she ridicules

them? Can she hide her drinking habit from inquiring parents when and if she becomes a dean? Something else to ponder.

So today, the day of the unforeseen chaos, the day she tottered between life and death, she semi-successfully puts aside all her hopes and fears, takes a few nips of Vodka, and continues to uphold her personal standards as the strictest teacher in the school. After 8-1 uses-up 10 minutes or so of time, as it copies from the board, they will have to recite their lessons out load: same as always.

Actually, compared to her other four sections of classes, this group is not really bad. Next year, if she's not the dean, Anita will teach French, There are many here who will do well. 8-1 is just a shade below the SP (special progress) classes. For some reason Anita doesn't enjoy her time with them. Do they know she is an alcoholic? The crushing work load, the reciting of lessons, etc. doesn't bother them. Sure, 9 SP 1 will take French. But she really would like more “average” kids to work with. Mrs. Baker was at one time a fine—even a great teacher. What happened? Boredom, ennui, torpidity...call it what you will. Every good teacher must constantly renew themselves. But since Anita went through Hell in the worst ghetto schools, she has spent years denying heaven to her students; instead giving them lessons about purgatory.

This is the last day she will ever teach a class. Because of one semi-inept student named Robert Tracz, a large chunk of Hell will fall right into her lap.

Aim: How Can You Tell That Your School Is Going Down The Tubes?

Just last week, this Vincent kid, not Robert, started to push Anita's buttons. He dared to come in late and just scribble on his desk! When the class leaves, her perfectly correct, two-inch high heels syncopate hurried clicks against the dark oak floor, carrying a pair of longish legs covered with gray-black hose. She runs to the back row of desks. Mr. Baker's well-made-up eyes peruse one particular wooden platform. "Oh my God! How dare he!" she soliloquizes. Mrs. Baker is shocked to bear witness to his crude, licentious pornography, now completely desecrating Board of Education property. She writes Jack a note. Even better, she'll go to his office right now. It's her free period. Jack tells he is aware of the escalating pornography filling-up his school.

Jack Russ muses. "...but a kid in *Anita's* class. What's going on? Vincent Todler? Can't recall the name. Oh yes, the basketball captain. He's never been trouble before."

Here and there, like cancerous cells, bits of visual smut appear in I.S. 303. The juiciest stuff is of course sprawled all over the bathroom tiles, even invading the formally pristine girl's bathrooms.

A while back, Vinny pushed Robert into the girl's bathroom. Thankfully no coeds were present to watch him pick-up his books, scattered all over the moist pink tiles. Oh my god! Quite a sight! His eyes beheld a horrific vision: drawn in red lipstick, tinted with colorful rouge, huge murals appear, depicting distorted sex organs and human and animal forms of copulation accompanied by words like *pussy, cock, fuck bitch whore*, etc. Our dear principal is not forgotten: *Williams sucks big dick cock!*

Girls! Jewish girls did this! The shocked student's nostrils fill with the aroma of marijuana, and stale tobacco-- a combination that is becoming more and more commonplace all the time.

We don't know much, the students of this middle school; but we do know the place is going to pot, literally and figuratively. Meetings of the P.T.A. are now becoming a forum where disquieting rumors and student observations are beginning to be taken seriously. There appears to be a group of students whose behavior is becoming unacceptable. Of course, Mister Williams publicly plays it all down, but privately, he is scared to death. How will he cope with the influx of Black kids who will soon bring their ghetto mentality to his hollowed halls? Things are bad enough already. The PTA writes five or six letters each week; some even to Dr. Abigail Crow, District's 28's Supervisor. Maybe the shit already hit the fan? His head is already on the block? Maybe, just maybe, it's time to "pack it in—going out while on top. He'll delight in seeing his Mets play ball. The Principal, quite affluent when compared to his peers, can easily afford season box seats. He's going for it. Let's Play Ball! And how long can he resist calling Sara Kurtz to his office?

IX

Aim: Why is it Necessary to Summarize our Lessons?

We're at something of turning point in our story. I.S. 303, 1972, Queens, New York, a college preparatory middle-school, primarily Jewish, is not as yet integrated. The narrative opens viewing the always demanding Mrs Anita Baker's Spanish class. Robert, trying to copy his

lessons is threatened by Vincent Todler, who has been harassing him from day one. Instead of giving the Bully an item he demands, Robert hits him in the face with his text book.

A group of Israeli students enroll in the school, and openly defy the rules. Murray Rothstein, a pugnacious little firebrand makes his own rules, seduces many girls and makes Robert his best friend. He attacks one of Vincent's henchmen when he trips Robert in the art room. Robert's Dad takes Murray on a tour of Chinatown and Little Italy. Real gangsters and Robert's Uncle meet Murray. Prejudice between Jew and gentile is overcome. Murray arranges for his friend to have sexual intercourse during gym class. The school's principal is now becoming uncomfortable with the danger signs of deteriorating discipline. He will retire, leaving Jack Russ, the AP, as usual, to "pick-up the pieces". But ...the best laid plans of mice and men....

X

Aim: What Did The Official Report To The Board Say?

Just seconds before Robert Tracz smashes Vincent Todler's face in, the enraged German-American kid, ran from his desk, confronting Robert-- face to face. The student's witnessing what transgressed, said that Vinny was shouting-out something about a book: something like "I'm taking it, douche-bag. Make something of it!" Yes, that appears true. Todler takes something—right out of Robert's side pocket: a little uncovered, square-shaped wedge of newsprint, they say. Certainly not a text book. Maybe a comic book? But Robert took it back and then hit Todler with the Spanish text. Robert started the violence, not Vinny. At least that's what Jack Russ transcribed into the official report that went to 110 Livingstone Street and the D.O.

What happened next—the girl getting hit in the face with a chair, requires a separate report, a copy of which goes to the NYPD.

Upon viewing Robert's act of violence, class 8-1 momentarily appears frozen in time. Aghast and stunned, they don't move a muscle. Then, as if awaking out of a trance, the gallery reveals its ugly face. The boys jump on their chairs, chanting “Fight! Fight...!” The girls remain seated, transforming into a Hecate-like, acne-marked, immoral chorus, breaking out in spasmodic glee, adding their shrieking sopranos to the boy's rhythmic taunts. Mrs. Carter finally turns to face her class, stands frozen and opened-mouthed, like a mute bronze statue, surveying the budding chaos unveiling itself before her very eyes.

As if responding to the chiding, egging-on, Todler slowly pulls himself off the classroom's floor. Robert stands his ground, pointing clinched fists right against Todler's thunder-struck visage. Robert in no way planned this to happen; but if his mortal enemy wants to fight, he's ready. He's come a long way since September, physically, emotionally, even sexually. His classmates want to see a good fight. Who cares which boy wins?

XI

Aim: How Does A Family Gathering Reveal A Path Robert Must Follow? Who Are “Double Trouble”?

Dana and Michelle, nicknamed “Double Trouble,” are my favorite cousins—identical twin girls. Their father, Walter Gemski, a NYPD Captain no less, wants them to have a new

start—another chance. What happened? Why another chance? In a nut shell, they grew-up way to fast in just too many ways. In the race to achieve adult status, they achieve numerous goals. Like Murray Rothstein, they are great actors. To evade adult responsibilities, the pair masquerade as children. To feast at the table reserved for adults; they have no trouble putting on airs, partaking of tobacco, maharaja, and of course sex. Lots and lots of sex.

Physically identical (only their mother can tell them apart), emotionally, very different. The shy Dana complements Michelle's extroversion; the former the strategist, the latter, the tactician. Two heads are better than one-- a complete, somewhat potentially dangerous pair of siblings to be sure. Our family is divided right down the middle when it comes to them. Most females possess an envy-laden hatred; most males, including Robert, love them.

Saint Ann's Academy for Girls considers itself fortunate to have them enrolled. Academically, they are solid, but not spectacular. European-Slavic-peasant stock often breeds great athletes. No exception here. Dana and Michelle are great at tennis, basketball, field hockey, and especially volleyball. They display an almost uncanny telepathic connection positioning their strong and agile bodies at just the right place. To their opponents, they're really *Double Trouble*.

They're “big” girls! Peter Paul Rubens, the great 17th Century master would reveille at not one, but two blond, voluptuous beauties. The models he did actually employ were about the same age as this set of twins---early teens. One surmises that girls grew into womanhood quickly back then; growing-up rapidly. Michelle and Dana could pass for adult women in the early thirties. If their Policeman-father knew that they carried “phony” I.D. cards (fake licenses obtained for a mere ten bucks) to attend bars and “discotheques,” he would have *killed* them both.

Studio 54, a short subway's ride uptown, becomes a favorite hang-out for the underage duo. Then one old geezer makes a disparaging remark about Dana's weight. The pair sent three *Disco Ducks* to the hospital, causing numerous injuries to many more. Captain Gemski used his influence to quell a potential scandal—underage drinking, drugs, etc. Of course he was “mad at” his girls, but he, the prideful-protecting father, would never let anyone call his girls “fat.” The old fart got what he deserved.

Michelle is the one with the temper. She has a history of loosing it. The twins were “star” volleyball players, taking their teammates to the CYO state Volleyball championships in Utica, New York. The entire team was disqualified when Michelle blew her top at an official she accused of giving her a bad call. Dana, earning a well-deserved rest on the bench, couldn't reach her crazed sister in time. The poor ref got quite a beating.

The Mother Superior gave them another chance, but both sisters possess a sexual appetite as tall as their still-growing bodies. A series of indecent indiscretions committed with boys from a neighboring parochial school, could not be overlooked. Their father is literally pulling his hair out. His wife, my aunt Minnie, a very average-looking middle-aged lady, suffered a mental breakdown. He warns that if they don't get their act together, he will use all his influence to see them incarcerated in a reformatory. Captain Walter Gemski doesn't fuck-around.

The twins realize Dad's not bull shitting. They pledge reformation, earn decent grades in the local public junior high, and even play volleyball again. Their present coach calls them, “The Twin Towers,” after the structure whose steel skeleton steadily rises over Down Town Manhattan. Walter Gemski's daughters will do much better in Queens; much better near their family; much better in I.S. 303.

The twins attend the Labor Day party given by Uncle Joe. The entire clan is there. Walter Gemski asks Bobby, sitting by himself as usual, if he wouldn't mind telling his daughters about their new school. Begrudgingly, the girls sit by his side, expecting a boring account of classes, etc. not at all expecting a tale of woe.

Dana, like her sister—both almost six-foot tall, still sport alluring summer garb, complete with very short (hot pants) bright-red cotton shorts, and polka-dotted bright-lemon-yellow halter tops that struggle to contain ample bra-less breasts. Sometimes called “heavy artillery” by admirers or opponents in sports, they are a natural gift, not inflated by gooey plastic insertions. Some years later, the twins will actually have their breasts surgically altered, removing some of their huge girth. Not one of the thirty or so females staring at them is even close in size. The men...

Their apartment house is on Third Avenue and 4th Street, downtown Manhattan, not by any means a lower-class tenement; but not a Park Avenue penthouse. Its black-tarred roof is used for sun bathing. Most women sunbathe topless. They are high above any peeping Toms, whose eyes would invade their privacy. Of course, the twins don't wear anything. They wouldn't care if they were ogled or not.

The young man piloting WOR TV's traffic helicopter never fails to give the uninhibited pair a wave when he directs his craft to take a slight detour away from the FDR Drive. He has viewed countless topless beauties. He has to do the old double take when Dana, transistor radio in hand, naked as a clam, waves her Jones Beach towel to the circling chopper. “Flying Freddie Feldman” enjoys his work.

In Forest Hills Gardens, at this Labor Day party, the twins are identical to the casual eye. Only their hair styles differentiate one from the other. One sports pigtails, cute, but in a way, menacing appendages, portending danger-- like swaying Mongolian oxtail standards appearing on the Christian steps of Eastern Poland. Michelle prefers her flaxen locks braided, a *Brunhilde*, recalling a Teutonic Valkyrie of myth and yore. Both girls are too beautiful, and certainly much too much mature-looking for their age. Double Trouble for sure.

Who knows what road they may travel on? Like little Murray, they get into trouble, revel in evading retribution, and are over-sexed. But Robert soon discovers twin hearts of gold beating in tangent with his own. If people really looked instead of gawked, they would notice intensely light-blue thoughtful, intelligent eyes. Their “motherly” instincts sense that their cousin is in some serious trouble. They will do all they can to help.

The last time Robert saw Michelle and Dana was at another party—maybe Christmas Day. We were only nine or so. They were pleasant enough at first, but stirred things up when they started fighting over a pair of dolls given to them by an admiring relative. Their Mom quelled the twins by feeding them ice creme and other goodies. Another cousin, slightly older, shared his colored chalks, another Christmas gift. For hours, every kid at the celebration covered the outside sidewalks till no more chalk remained. Even then I could draw. Even then, I excelled. The twins never forgot the way I placed their names into the center of a pinkish-red heart that I casually drew. It was almost perfectly symmetrical, like one found on a box of Valentine's Day chocolates. Did I have a “crush” on them? Well, they insisted I add my name to the heart, and when I did, I received dual kisses on my blushing cheeks. Before my encounter with Merrill, it was my first and only kiss.

Now six years later, the Twins follow their father's directions and sit next to cousin Bob. Do they remember him? Yes they do! "Still drawing Cousin Bob?" they ask, first thing. "Of course," Bob answers with obvious pride. The trio feels quite comfortable, wanting to catch-up on lost time.

They appear a funny-looking group, sitting on the massive living room's central couch. "Bob the Bland," wearing insipid school-like cloths his mother picked for him, sandwiched between decked-out towers of potent femininity. Robert is here to give a "heads up" about what to expect at their new middle school. But he will not talk about the tests, the homework, or even Murray. Robert just feels that these two mature girls could give him advice. He tells it all. The twins stop chewing their gum, their faces aghast, almost appearing like being slapped by a pair of invisible hands. Adult relatives, overhearing the narration, stand opened-mouthed, shocked by what they hear. Cousin Bob has become the center of the party's attention.

"Didn't the school do anything?" the twin's mother, asks, directing the inquiry to Robert's parents, who are standing in an adjacent corner, all alone.

"Every time I call and complain I'm told, 'it will be taken care of,' Bob's Mother finally retorts, realizing she is now being held accountable. She adds, "At the last parent-teacher conference every one of Bob's teachers said they had no idea what was going on. They would tell the principal. Again, nothing happened."

"Hey! If Bob was a Jew-boy, they'd rake that spineless cocksucker fat piece of shit-Jew principal over the coals and fire the son of a bitch," cries a female voice from the crowd. All nod in agreement. Another uncle adds, "Hey Steve, you're the *father*. Didn't you "talk to" this punk's

Dad? At this, Steve becomes fidgety, his eyes start blinking like an out-of-control strobe light. “Couldn’t find him,” he exclaims, as he bends, compressing his tall handsome figure into an angular, crippled singularity—a shield designed to transform the gallery of incriminating razor-sharp stares into tear-eyed sympathetic pathos. It doesn’t work. All the piercing eyes seem to ask, “Why didn’t *you* help *your* boy?”

Robert wants to shout, “Bullshit Dad! He lives a few blocks away. When you finally made it to his stoop, you cowered at the sight of his face. You half-believed him, when he told you *I was picking on his son*—not the other way around.” The image of My Dad, a Tracz, now reduced to a skeleton-like (in Polish, *szkielet*) figure, cowering under the Hun, would haunt me 50 years later. It is not the time for my indictment-- in fact, calling him a liar. I know he loves me: pays my bills, brings me to expensive Park Avenue doctors, possess faith and confidence in my budding artistic ability. But time and again, he lets me down when I need his *emotional strength*. Maybe he can’t give what he himself does not possess.

So my Mom, only a Tracz by marriage, possessing no street smarts and an overly sensitive fragile disposition, is now paralyzed with embarrassment. She wants her husband to take her home. By now, Robert has had enough: another dead end here. Maybe Uncle Joe can help is favorite nephew? Where is he? Robert has an idea.

A recombinant figure appears as a vague outline silhouetted against a pale-yellow light. A string of plastic Oriental lanterns Aunt Anna struggled to string on the surrounding arboretum is illuminating Bob’s Uncle. When blessed with good health Bob’s Uncle avoided physical labor; now sick and old, he hardly moves at all, even at the party he is sponsoring.

During the entire party, he has been out on the patio, occupying a chaise lounge surrounded by tall Cyprus trees, wrought-iron fences, and myriad rhododendron plants. At dinner, willing relatives brought him the food, most of which, his wife prepared herself. The couple's home, a mansion in Forest Hills Gardens, constructed in the Spanish style, resembles the Alhambra—a far cry away from tenements found on Delaney Street, or Avenue B.

Robert was never privy to exactly how his aunt and uncle built their fortune. Family gossip partially revealed that his favorite uncle was in construction, lucked-out, squandered his money, swindled his friends, and is now facing a Federal indictment for tax fraud. He made the papers: *Long Island Contractor Indicted for Income Tax Evasion*. His wife, Robert's aunt Anna, has already sold the grand piano, her painting collection, and the huge Persian rugs that used to grace the hand-placed mosaic tiles on the terrazzo floor. All these luxurious items were purchased at auction at the world-famous Park Bennett galleries in Manhattan. Acquiring antiques, speculating in real estate, and screwing-around, appears to be at an end. Joe's very ill; his wife, a wreck. How much *cash* is left? That's the question.

Along with my father, Steve, the young Uncle Joe was taken out of grade school by the former Sergeant in the Austrian Army, now choosing to become an immigrant, in search of fame and fortune in the streets of Downtown New York. The brothers never got a chance to finish 7th grade, were given a tool box and told to get to work. By now, Joseph Tracz Senior made a bundle, squandering his fortune on some low-class whore, who kicked him out of their Park Avenue Apartment. He returned penniless to Poland. The brothers prospered. Uncle Joe, in turn became rich, very rich. After years in a plush Greenwich Village townhouse, Joe's wife talks him into following the family migration to Queens. There's enough money left to buy 25-78 *Green*

Way North, centrally nestled in the heart of Forest Hills Gardens. The famous, “West Side Tennis Club” at that time, still hosting the U.S. Open.

Aunt Anna, something of an athlete her self, wants to join. It's *restricted*; she's Ukrainian-Polish, not thankfully a Jew. But the committee rejects her five thousand dollar check anyway. In the required interview, she displays huge diamond rings, thick golden chains, and is dressed in a conservative, but super-expensive gown, revealing just the correct amount of cleavage to the committee-- made-up of millionaire doctors, politicians, etc-- her neighbors. A voice coach hired especially for this occasion failed to make *a silk purse out of a sow's ear*. No Professor Higgins from *Pygmalion* could be found; but maybe a lesson was learned as shown by the masterful film, *Citizen Kane*: money doesn't buy talent or class. She is not admitted into any high-class social club. Joe couldn't care less. She is secretly despondent, writing it all off as prejudice against eastern Europeans.

Her house—her world, reveals her situation. The mansion has been turned into something like Jed Clampett's plush residence on the T.V. Show, The “Beverly Hillbillies”. French antique “Empire” marble-inlay tables are valued as much as kitschy lamps and 4th-rate mass-produced oil painting. Even my adolescent (but visually acute) eyes discern gross examples of bad taste. Anna, an under-educated seamstress, till she married Joe, decorated the place herself and botched the whole thing up. She's a tough cookie, not a classy Park Avenue type. She beats the shit out of a concubine she found in bed with her wayward cheating Hubby. It's a lonely world, my Aunt Ana's world; now made lonelier, as the rats start to desert the sinking ship.

This party is something of a swan song. A “For Sale” sign occupies the front lawn. The German-American gardener who preformed an impeccable job, had to be let go. So under the

twilight's protection, Aunt Anna does her own lawn, her own packing, her own crying. Even the gentle autumnal breeze, (*A Night in the Garden of Spain*) can not prevent a pall of sadness overcoming the party guests. Ironically, the topic of my plight is a welcome diversion. After the fiasco, I tell my still embarrassed parents, I'll walk home without them. I desire to be alone. Almost every one has left, including the twins. But I make a stop and change my life.

Bob approaches the recombinant figure with a smile. His Uncle Joe resembles the actor Stephen Hill, the district attorney in TV's *Law and Order*--same balding head, same age (middle sixties), and a very similar voice. When the fictitious D.A. Talks, people listen; when the laconic Joesph Tracz talks, people listen too.

As usual, a pack of "Chesterfields" is within his easy reach. A half-filled glass of Scotch precariously teeters on the edge of an expensive-looking oval-shaped Art Nouveau-style glass table, holding a cigarette-ash-laden silver ash tray and the real estate section of the *New York Times*. It's funny, memory recollects that in all our meetings throughout the decade, he almost always was in some kind inclined, lackadaisical position. I only saw him standing upright that memorable day in Chinatown. How he managed his daily domestic life functions-- no less commutes to Manhattan, is beyond me.

His bother, my Dad always encouraged us to talk. "Hey Bob, your Uncle is alone! Go on over!" We both nursed heart conditions, we shared an eye for art, and we both appreciate the power and the might a gun in hand could give the owner. He did most of his hunting German soldiers in Europe, working his way up from buck private at Salerno to master sergeant at the Regmagen Bridge. He was a "sapper,"--Army Corp of Engineers. Both brothers enlisted together. An errant practice explosion at training camp left Steve with a serious concussion, a

steel plate surgically implanted, married to his Polish belfry. Uncle Joe got away with minor injuries.

War and war stories fascinated me. Viewing *Combat*, *Combat Sergeant*, *Soldier of Fortune* at times took precedent over drawing and painting. Being something of a young realist, I wanted to know the truth behind Hollywood recreations on TV. It was easy to get this real combat vet to talk about his experiences. I took in every detail, as the combat-hardened explosives expert responded to an array of machine-gun-like questions that came at him like 9 millimeter bullets shot from a Kraut *Maschिंगewehr 34*. Time stood transfixed for the young nephew, as his uncle recounted his exploits involving landmines. blowing-up bridges, and creating general mayhem. That wily smile appeared and disappeared, sometimes replaced by contemplative sadness when recalling actions that maimed or killed his buddies, his *Band of Brothers*.

Had he lived a little longer, we could have shared stories about our addiction to beautiful women. Joe even has an illegitimate kid, a really distant family relation, who most in the clan, only heard about, but never met. Murray repeatedly tells me *love* is a dangerous trap. Play the field. Would have Uncle Joe reinforce his warnings if he was talking to an adult nephew? And would he tell about his father's encounters with a menagerie of femme fatalles?

The entire Tracz clan was the quintessence of relapsed Catholicism. But Baptisms, Confirmations, and of course funeral rites, were taken seriously. When I became confirmed, the regally clad Bishop, privy to the throne of Saint Peter, gave Robert his "Confirmation" name, that was my privilege to choose. A resounding "Joseph" accompanied the symbolic slap on his

face, symbolizing the pain and suffering of adulthood, was memorable. Now, I'm a soldier in Christ. Now I'm an adult! I know the difference between right and wrong.

At the plush reception honoring his Confirmation, Robert was engulfed by well-wishers. Nestled inside of a gorgeous card, a \$2000 savings bond was discovered: *To my favorite nephew, Love Aunt Anna and Uncle Joe.* I still have the card, later spending the sum on my “college” education-- an education that few in I.S. 303 ever thought I would achieve.

For some reason, conversation with my Uncle never went beyond the war. What about civilian life? He never brings those days up at all. My Dad told me unbelievable accounts of mayhem his brother orchestrated in civilian life. “You'll die laughing! Did I tell you about the time...” I had to ask...

"Uncle Joe. Back in Poland, did you really tell your parents who were going to kill yourself, and then throw your hat in the village well? Did you watch the police and half the village try to drain the water?"

“Uncle Joe, did you really get beaten-up by city cops for smoking *your* cigarettes? Did you really push a chimney down on them when they retreated to a back ally to enjoy your smokes?"

“Uncle Joe, Did you really stop-up the drains on an a tenement's roof and let go a flood of water from the tank-- bathing the poor families sleeping on the fire escapes, trying to escape the sweltering summer heat?"

There was more-- a lot more. You wouldn't believe it! And to every question he only answered with that, "Uncle Joe" grin-- devilish, clandestine, angelic, beguiling.

He's gone now, passing right before I finished the 8th grade-- not being done in by a diseased heart, but Emphysema. His cigarettes! God, I miss him.

Is he in Heaven? He was a Catholic. He had "last Rites" you know. Well, Saint Peter, you better watch out. If you deny this Joseph admission through the Pearly Gates, he may set off a dynamite charge and blow-up the whole kit-and-caboodle!

"Uncle Joe. I'm having a problem. Some serious shit. Last term a kid that was my friend is now picking on me. I can't take it. Nobody is doing anything to help me." The pushing, tripping, mocking laughter—I tell it all. He remains immobile, immovable, the cigarette in his hand allowed to fall to the ground. "Dad went to his house..."

"Your Dad. Steve? What happened?" showing keen interest.

The German fuck yelled at him. He said *I* was picking on his son!

"*A German?...*Then..."

"Well...Dad came back to our car and cursed him out to me. He said Mom would call the school. The twins said to *kick the Fuck in the balls and scratch his eyes out!*"

"Good advice! But you're not a fighter—you're an artist," he pronounces. I smile, nod, and continue to listen. "I bet Michelle and Dana would *love* to pay the fuck a visit. But he sounds like the type that will get even," says the sagacious old man, like he's been threw it all before

himself. Now with heightened interest, adding with growing enthusiastic curiosity, his tired-looking visage is refurbished with youth and vigor. He's now sitting up. "You'll have to face him sooner or later. Better sooner."

"But I can't fight!" I plead.

"Steve tells me you can shoot better than him. You hunt too? Deer? You don't sit around on your ass! Make a fist." I do. "Not bad. You hate this cock-sucker? *Put your hate in here!*" His pale, skinny hand squeezes my youthful, if not quiet, pudgy, but certainly non-muscular hand. Vinny's hands, thin, but powerful from years of cutting lawns, are years ahead of any manly strength I could muster. "You'll never learn how to use that from your Dad. I'm too old to teach you. Michelle, her sister? A start, Bobby."

"But my heart condition..."

"Yes, a problem. But think, Bob. You're not a pussy. You're tall, like the twins. You exercise a little. Fish and hunt. You can take that Hun fuck." *One-on-one Germans-- they're pussies.*" I never remembered him so animated, so belligerent; I never heard him curse like a teenager. Wow!

We shake hands, our farewell embraces, longer, tighter than ever before. "How sick *are* you Uncle?" is what I wish to ask. My Dad plays his illness down, aware that feigning illness to evade debt collectors, was a favorite ploy used for years. Something tells the admiring nephew that this could be a final meeting. He's deathly sick for real. But I put on another act, "You'll be OK. Just take it easy! 'try to visit next week. Bye!" my face, turned 180 degrees around,

protecting a concocted childish naiveté, a papier-mache mask concealing a deep concern that momentarily eclipses my newly-rejuvenated self-confidence.

Uncle Joe's utterly phlegmatic disposition, passive demeanor, and angelic smile are inscrutable—a Gordian Knot no one ever successfully untied. Only a sword, wheeled by the angle of death, not Alexander the Great, will eventually reveal a saint, sinner, or as in most mortals, a disposition something in between. Now, alone on his chaise, his bulk reduced to a mere 100 pounds, drifting in and out of sleep-- his lungs, rhythmical wheezing, a chant, a mantra, could summon the angel of death, right now.

If not taken out of school, would have he became a fabulous artist? A clever lawyer? A great doctor? For the first time in a long time, he is allowing a deep emotional vacuum—a depression as dark as death itself, to cause an introspection. He has a 30-year-old son, Robert, nicknamed “Chubby.” Robert is called *Robert* in honor of his son, “Chubby”. Joseph Tracz did not take *his* boy out of school. Bright, intelligent, strong—all the good family traits and attitudes rolled-up in another self- confident, rambunctious man, who could chose any road he wishes. Maybe because Chubby envies the opulence his mother thrives in; and maybe because he is unable to focus on academics, he decides not to finish high school. He becomes a builder, a contractor too. Married to a beautiful woman, he is a loving father to four little kids, the next generation. Joseph shares the family wealth; but when the predicted “bubble” finally does go bust, Chubby finds him self alone. He delights in orchestrating mayhem as creative as anything his father ever invented. Scratching out a living on the lower East Side is his chosen path. He swindles and hoodwinks in the tradition of his father. Once he actually told everyone in Chinatown, that his father passed away out in Queens. He collects a bundle for “flowers.” “Big

Bill” just about suffers a coronary when Josphe Tracz appears on his usual corner on Mott Street. Chubby is at *Belmont Race Track*. “Brave Bull” a good bet.

Now, realizing his days are days, not years, Joseph Tracz only feels truly remorseful when he communes with his favorite nephew. He's the only one who really doesn't give a shit that his money is gone. He's the only one who cares about the real fact that he was a real war hero. He *will* finish high school and graduate college. But most of all, he knows that this Robert—Steve's Robert, really loves him. *Before he dies, he must do something for this boy.*

X11

Aim: What Does Kathryn Do For Her Beleaguered Son, Robert

A mile walk through these fairy-tale-like streets is a walk through *A Paradise Garden* (garden means paradise); alas, with no golden-haired maiden, lovingly, passionately surrendering herself to her noble knight before his combat in the lists, Robert Tracz walks alone, again.

It's 1 AM. It's a lonely paradise, his world. He has become “a man,” has a great friend, but he's still very much alone. Perpendicular box-like city urbanity will as yet, not offer solace. Petula Clarke's “Downtown” city streets, aglow with seductive illumination, will not entice him. Robert would rather be meandering this way through his beloved woods. But the park-like Forest Hills Garden's streets will substitute for now. Like a trained saddled horse suddenly given its head, he allows himself to explore unknown paths. Giant oak, maple, and cypress trees take on an animation of human-like proportion. Not a mocking gallery bearing witness to his foibles, they are his friends—like the trees growing in the rural woods, offering escape from the omnipresent concrete. How often do his upstate friends reciprocate his love by volunteering to

reveal a hiding grouse or a clever six-point buck? How many times do they patiently offer their grandeur, posing as beautiful nude models to be captured by canvass and brush?

How long has he wandered here: hours, months, years? The pilgrim passes under a small brick arch informing the traveler that he is no longer pacing private streets. Paradise ends here. His friends wave goodbye, as occasional gusts of wind sway their branches in mournful tribute. Opulent estates are now reduced to hovel-like, wooden-framed residences; their insipid appearance appearing collectively constructed by an uninspired cubist architect. Trees are just trees; traffic lights and fast-moving cars, remind that the reality of middle-class city life is the realty facing nine million souls.

Manse Street, the block where Robert's tormentor resides, is just around the corner. Could a brick through his window erase the haunting memory of seeing his father cowering under the reproaching waving finger wielded by Mr. Todler? How long can he live with the vision of his cowardly descent from Todler's stoop?

Uncle Joe would destroy his car or even incinerate the whole sleeping clan with a fire-bomb. Why not at least break a window! There are plenty of heavy rocks around; It's late...may never get this chance again. Maybe Robert's a coward-- Just like his Dad? Or maybe, he's not anything like his Dad or his Uncle at all. His survival and ultimate vindication lay as yet undiscovered between two extremes. An undiscovered country, a middle road, a middle path; but not before he calls upon inner strength tempered with skill and fortitude—not manifested with a paint brush, but with a fist.

“Hey Bob! You forgot this!” Dana yells, handing her favorite cousin a portfolio of drawings he forgot to show his uncle. Finally arriving at his house, Robert sees an awaiting Fleetwood Cadillac driven by an impatient-looking Aunt Anna. The twins emerge from the back, not at all trying to hide their girlish curiosity as to what transpired between the uncle and his nephew. The drawings could have waited till the morrow. “OK Bob. What gives? What did he say?” Michelle inquires, her arms akimbo, chewing her gum like there's no tomorrow. “Well, he says I have to fight.” he ventures an answer, with a confused, unmeasured continence.

“We could of told you that,” their answer in unison, bellowing in wisdom-filled emotion, as if coming from irate teachers. “We can show you a few moves if you want,” Michelle snarls, no longer appearing just pretty and tall. She's become a savage lioness. She thrusts her lanky muscular leg into the air, her sandal-clad foot stopping inches before Cousin Bob's dumbfounded face. “We learned by watching karate movies,” her twin informs, her brief pedagogical account sandwiched between an all-knowing, experienced laughter. Her sister joins in.

“Great! Wow!” Bob imagines his foot crashing into Todler's nasty pock-marked face. “Hey! I saw a “Martial Arts” school opening-up next to the *Inwood Movie* on the Avenue. I'm going to take karate lessons!” he resounds. But this will cost some bucks. He will have to do some pleading back home.

Home is no Forest Hills Garden mansion, being instead just a typically two-storied wooden-framed, shingle-clad two story affair that is graced by ample foliage and very imposing, sheltering English maple trees. Dad is an independent carpenter by trade, rarely tackling jobs out side his milieu. When things are slow in Manhattan, he improves his castle: redoing the basement, adding new windows, etc. The attic is now his son's painting studio. His uncanny luck

at Belmont Park dropped enough cash in his pocket to build himself a country home, where his two sons, “the fruit of his loins,” thrive in wilderness glee: fishing, shooting, and enjoying the company of a father, who despite a myriad of shortcomings, is loving and good. But Mom holds the purse strings. Can I have money to learn how to fight? This is going to be a tough sell.

At this ungodly hour, a lone light—a kitchen light burns. They left it on for him. Everything is as it was. The dog, “Billy,” a prize hunting Beagle, greets with a wagging tail. His master offers a late-night walk, being careful not to awaken sleeping parents to the sounds of their departure. Upon our return, my Mom appears in the brightly illuminated kitchen, the sight of so the usual family arguments and assorted heartaches. A bowl of fresh water greets our beloved pet. A baleful and inquisitive motherly stare greets the teen-age boy.

Even with her hair up in curlers, clad in a modest light-blue bathrobe, and wearing comfortable house slippers, my Mother is a beautiful. The double onslaught of middle-age and the trials of living with her moody husband have rendered her a figure verging on the tragic. Her face reveals fragility. On its exquisite features a wise viewer could discern a fierce stubbornness that she calls upon to assuage “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” that her ultra-sensitivity is unable to build battlements against.

Kathryn Meikoeska hated Catholic school. One day, she appeared in school wearing non-regulation socks. Her teacher-nun told the boys in the class to beat her legs with sticks! “I will never go back there! Do want you want. I'm not going back,” she cried to “Nana,” my material grandmother. And when the Mother Superior arrived at her the home promising eternal damnation, the abused student found the inner courage to hold fast.

If bucolic vistas became her son's paradise, Public School 50 became hers. Never missing a day, she blossomed in every conceivable way: academically, in gymnastics, and of course, art. Winning the Borough of Queens gold medal was something of a high-point. Her son was never so honored. But in 1988, a group of *Mr. T's* "Special Education" students took first place in the *City-Wide* competition!

"Thanks for taking "Billy" out," her words expressed to me in an effort to "break the ice," as they say. "You shouldn't bother Uncle Joe, Bob. He's pretty sick you know; and staying-up so late. Walking home alone..."

"I wasn't bothering him, Mom. Just talking. ' wanted to know that I can do about Vinny. I'm not taking that crap anymore." The defiance she showed my maternal grandmother was a major inheritance I was given from her side of the genetic pool. Now it could be my *ace in the hole*. Should I threaten to not return to I.S. 303 Monday morning?

"You're in the best school in the city. You got an "A" in orchestral music. You're going to college, Bob." I don't think you would like Catholic school." She continues extolling the virtues of the environment that was becoming more hospitable, but still holding the presence of my omnipresent tormentor.

"Mom! You're not doing anything! The school isn't doing anything. My uncle tells me I must fight for myself! This is my battle...The Twins said...."

"Oh Jesus Christ! Them! Stay away! They're bad girls...."

“But they don't take anything from nobody, Mom.” I'd like to shout, ‘They don't take SHIT from anyone.’”

“Your heart condition?” she pleas.

“If I can row a boat across the Asokan Reservoir and chase deer through the woods, I can learn how to fight! A martial arts school is opening up. I want to go there. Please!”

I go upstairs to bed, hoping this is not another dead end. Mom looks into the sad-looking eyes of our innocuous-- looking Beagle sitting by her side. Born with a hunter's heart, the family pet would adapt the manner of a Doberman Pincher—tearing the throat out of any miscreant daring physical harm to *his* family.

Kathryn Tracz will leave the dinner dishes in the sink. It's been a long day. She sits, crosses her legs and gives herself a moment of reflection. Bob is really upset. Can things really be that terrible there? The memories of the beating the sadistic boys gave her never really left her. She had no help then; her son does not have anybody now. No one kid should force Bob to run away. Is fighting the only way out? She slowly climbs the stairs, and sees her Billy scamper into Bob's bed room. He has chosen to sleep next to Bob for a week now. Dogs have a “six sense” about things. Mom peeks in. Her son's just about going to sleep. “OK Bob. Take your lessons. But I'm calling that principal tomorrow. I don't want you to fight anybody. But you're staying in there. It's your school.”

Still more asleep than awake, Bob finally nods-off. Did he hear his Mom? The 8-year-old Beagle, who has been mute witness to the household's triumphs and tragedies, has had a long day

too. Strangely animated for this late hour, he jumps from Bob's bed, follows his mistress to her bed and licks her face with a wagging tale.

Mrs. Stephen Tracz is true to her word. Her son will take his lessons. She has another talk with the Park-Avenue doctor, whom her husband located for his son. Yes, a “moderate” course in self-defense would be beneficial. Mrs. Tracz also calls the Principal's office, again. Williams' secretary, Mrs. Gold, has strict instructions to transfer any calls concerning discipline problems to his A.P. Jack Russ is at the District Office right now. Dr. Cloud, the Superintendent knows what's going in IS 303.

Abigail Cloud, PhD has hunter's blood flowing threw her veins. The Chiricahua Apache war chief, Cochise, is the 45-year-old chief administrator's fraternal great grandfather. She knows that Jack Russ carries the burden on his back alone. Williams must go. But politics being politics—especially racial politics, Jack Russ may not be given the head job. It will have to be a minority. If she has anything in common with the fool Williams, it's the shared fate of becoming living anachronisms. She will find another position. Like the legendary Native-American Thunderbird, her spirit will soar above the sacred Earth, ultimately resurrecting itself in an educational system that will appreciate her wisdom, her passion, her love of children. Before Dr. Cloud was anything else, she's a teacher-- as is the hard-working, Jack Russ, who will probably play second-fiddle to a less experienced “racially correct” appointment. She will fight to have him appointed as an acting-intern principal at least for the remainder of the term.

Mrs. Steve Tracz has been given the brush-off again. She will do the family grocery shopping instead of going to the school. A rather long shopping list is nestled in her bag. But before she leaves, she desires another look at the portrait she has just about finished. It's of her

son, Robert. She climbs the stairs to the attic art-studio, and nods an approving perusal at the image. The Master artist-housewife has caught the innocent-looking countenance, the predilection to love and be loved, and that certain pathos, that is really inherited from his mother, herself. How dare her sister-in-law call her a hack! If fate awarded a different path, Kathryn would have become a successful—even great portraitist, or famed fashion illustrator. Her son has chosen to display the prize-winning pen-and-ink rendition of an elegantly statuesque lady, draped in a long fur coat. It was this artwork that she won the prestigious art award. Could a Hans Holbein, or an Albrecht Durer have been any more successful in rendering the texture of fur and lace? But her chosen path has rendered her into just another mundane, aging housekeeper. Considering her husband's prevailing cowardness, she must take up the gauntlet to save her boy.

If she was a Doctor's or lawyer's wife, would she be content to just experience yet another run-around? She's going to see that Principal now. She will redress herself, and parade through the hallowed halls in a tight-fitting conservative blue-green suit just purchased from the cleanse-racks from *Alexander's Department* store. Her two-carrot diamond engagement wedding-set and a 200 carrot aqua-marine ring will knock their socks off. She will be poised, dignified, and forceful.

The mother with a mission, now on a last-ditch journey to stop a violent confrontation, takes one last glimpse of son's picture. She's unaware that her craft has failed to capture a quality that maybe only Rembrandt Van Rijn's arch-genius would have never missed. When pushed to the edge of abyss, his handsome young visage will reveal an innate self-confidence, distilled into animal rage and fight like his very life depended on it.

Mrs. Tracz arrives at the school. Like the parting of the Red Sea, the throng of students acquiesces, paying homage to her stately presence. She makes a bee-line to the Principal's office. Her outfit is perfect; her white pumps give added height and the heels can be heard clicking in the hushed silence offered in abeyance to this beautiful, prosperous-appearing woman. Whose mother could this be?

Many girls stop her, begging a closer look at the bobbles that shine like fallen stars. When they marry, will their husbands endow them with such riches? Do they know that Mr. Tracz never even finished middle school? Mrs Tracz never went to college, but she's not like her sister-in-law: crude, totally uneducated as to the basics of colloquial discourse. She'll show them that she can talk with anyone. But does she as yet have the *chutzpah*, a necessary quality of an advocate? You bet your Dupa this gal has *Chutzpah*.

Williams, is standing right at his office door. He has no idea who this could be. Maybe she's from Livingston Street or an envoy from the mayor's office? Thank god the Mets are not playing today. The radio is silent. He will flatter her; make her comfortable. Mrs. Tracz takes a seat, crosses her legs, and tells Williams who she is and why she is here.

“Your son Robert is being bullied by a student—a Vincent T... Can't recall the name. Oh yes, there's a Todler who is the Basketball's team Captain. Can't recall any trouble with him. Maybe your son's exaggerating. Mr. Russ who usually handles discipline problems, is unfortunately at a meeting. Mr. Greg, the gym teacher would know him. I'll get him right-up.”

Mrs. Tracz takes it all in. She eyes the baseball paraphernalia encircling the Head Man's imposing-appearing desk. She says to herself, "Can't Recall... I bet his man could recall a whole line of baseball statistics...I bet he doesn't even know my son's name."

Mister Greg does appear. "Robert's mother! Glad to meet you Mrs. Tracz. He's made so much progress. He's a fighter!" Robert's Mom iterates that she's here to stop the savage harassment that could lead to a real fight.

"I've been here six years, Mrs. Tracz. I'm proud to say that fights never happen." Williams points out. Greg adds, "Robert used to be teased by some of the boys. But he is now a leader, turning into a good athlete. Todler? Never saw any problem with him, Mrs. Tracz.

Another dead end? No. Not this time. Mrs. Kathryn Tracz insists on another meeting. She requires this Todler kid, his mother, and Jack Russ to be present at the next meeting. If Williams can't arrange this, she'll go over his head—right to Abigail Cloud. The meeting is scheduled for the day after the fight, the day after the broken face, the day after the heart attack.

Upon leaving the office, Mrs. Tracz literally bumps into Merrill Greenbaum. Neither females has any idea how fate has, at least temporarily, brought them together on its mysterious meandering path. Of course Robert's Mom shows off her rocks to the awe-struck 8th grader. They look so much alike. Merrill could almost be the daughter Mrs. Tracz longed to have. Could she know her son, Robert? Yes she does! "The artist! You're Bob's Mom. He said you were beautiful..."

Maybe her oldest son will someday marry, "a nice Jewish girl."

The confrontation will not take place in a boxing ring, or a street corner, but right in the middle of Mrs Anita Baker's Spanish class.

XIII

Aim: How Does Sara Kurtz Get Hit Hit In the Face with A Chair? How Does Mrs. Baker Get a Heart Attack?

Now that a meeting that undoubtedly would have prevented the serious classroom brawl was never to have taken place, we see what happened after Robert just hit Vinny Todler squarely in the face with a text book. The fallen student, finds his feet and approaches Robert Tracz who appears ready for a real knock-down fight. Vincent instead of fighting man-to-man, grabs a vacant chair and hurls it at Robert's head. He ducks! It flies like an unbalanced Ninja star, grazes his left shoulder, smacking right into a classmate's—a girl classmate's-- face! The speeding wood and steel make mince-meat out of her cheeks and nose. Blood flows profusely from her nostrils. Hellish cat-like screams and hysterical cries quickly replace the chiding chant. Wide-eyed shock and dropping jaws now echo the teacher's frozen continence.

Mrs. Baker becomes faint, grabs her chest, and totters to her desk, breathing erratically when breathing at all. Finally, a girl races from the room, a panting security guard returns, attending to the fallen pedagogue and the poor girl with the broken face. Vincent flees. No one sees Tracz pick-up the innocent-looking book he returns to the safety of a pocket. Like on a Sunday stroll (another walk through...a *Paradise Garden*..?), Robert voluntarily canters off to Mister Russ's office, head held high.

XIV

Aim: How is Principal Williams Day Ruined Again?

Principal, Jason Horst Williams' day is ruined again! His *Amazin's* just dropped another one—this time to the lowly Texas Rangers. Shit, if they didn't trade Nolan Ryan... He turns off the radio, Bob Murphy's sorrowful voice, describing the play-by-play, momentarily silenced. There's a real commotion going on outside! He opens his door, venturing a peek.. Kids and teachers running threw the halls. Screaming sirens are head approaching! In a million years, he would never guess...

He retreats back to his office, teeters; finally totally collapsing on to his big mahogany chair. For Christ sake, he *was* told countless times by City Hall, The Board of Ed, that since *this* junior high was located in a quiet middle-class neighborhood: *only minimal behavioral problems would be encountered*. Something happened! Something bad!

Jayson Williams' real name is Wilensky, of Russian Jewish descent; ironically his family roots grew in the same neighborhood from which Robert's Dad's family tree sprung. Anglicizing Jewish names is so common place in P.S. 303; one would think that when pursuing the school's roles, they were viewing a list of British students enrolled in Eaton.

After dropping out of law school, Jay earned enough education credits to earn a teaching position in Seward Park High school--smack in the middle of the Lower East Side. Too much like the fictitious school depicted in the film, *The Blackboard Jungle*, he relocates to Minnesota, becomes a fair teacher, eventually becoming an adjunct in a state teaching college. He publishes a book on educational statistics. He knows numbers. Not teaching. Jay, returns to New York, and uses his minor fame and political connections to be appointed to I.S.303. "Academic Excellence" is *his invention--his slogan*. After six long years, he does nothing—He doesn't have to. Jack runs

the whole shebang. The higher-ups aren't fools. Since the school is so unique, it literally runs itself. After all, how much damage can he do? Reading and math scores are falling all through the city. They're not quite so bad under his tutelage.

A chronic malcontent, he pictures himself in comfortable retirement when things get a bit untidy: the belligerent Israeli boys, graffiti, etc. The chickens have come home to roost! He feels betrayed when the escalating discipline problems are dropped at his feet. How can they expect him to improve sagging reading scores? How can they expect him to stop the raging hormones, curb the sexual high jinks, mitigate the influx of drugs, and erase the tons of Graffiti? He is a famous educator, not a shit-faced prison warden!

Jake Russ literally bursts into the Principal's office, regaining his usual composure, summarizing the events to his incredulous boss. A student—a girl—was hit in the face with a chair, and a teacher, Mrs. Baker, may have suffered a heart attack. Police and EMS are on their way. Putting first things first, the Principal tells his secretary to place a call to his family lawyer. He's not thinking about anything else except, covering his own fat ass.

“What do you think the girl's family will do?” He timidly inquires.

The lawyer's answer, “Well, I'm guessing that that the young man's family has no real money, so they'll file suit against the City. Everyone sues the Board of Ed sooner or later. They'll have a good chance of collecting, but it will take years. And of course, they may go after *you* personally.”

“W-h-a-t-!”

“Yes. If their lawyer can make a case proving that *you* failed to establish and provide an atmosphere of educational propriety and safety, they can go after *you*.”

“Could the teacher who suffered the heart attack sue too?”

“Sure. Why not! Every two-bit shyster in the tri-state area is chomping at the bit willing to take her case *pro bono*. The publicity could make him a really fat cat. By the way, what about the injured girl? Know anything about her family?”

“Yeah, I think her father *is* a lawyer.”

“Not good.”

“No shit.”

Jay's entire life could be flushed down the toilet. He may have to re-mortgage his home and-or sell his boat to pay his legal fees, no less cough-up a big cash settlement.

And then there's the threat of scandal. Fights are so common throughout the system; they usually go unreported by the press. A near race-riot at *Erasmus Hall* got barely two inches of copy in *The Times*. But a broken face and a heart attack: juicy stuff. He can see it now: *P.S. 303: LESSONS WRITTEN IN BLOOD!* “The Daily News,” “The New York Post,” would eat it up. Mayor Lindsay, frustrated in his efforts to gain the Democratic presidential nomination is a lame duck, so he wouldn't do anything to help. He prays the District Superintendent and an army of bureaucrats can quell the fires. He will personally talk to the girl's father, hopefully directing all the anger at the Todler boy. With the school's honor and reputation at stake, maybe Mister Kurtz

will be content with not having his daughter's bandaged face appearing on the front page of any paper.

The law suits are another matter. They can sue the city all they want. Good luck! A law suit filled against him for “failure to provide a proper educational environment...” is a million to one shot at best. And the humiliation of forced retirement? He can live with that.

As it turns out, the city papers were planning to feature the story page one. The Board of Ed's pleas fell on death ears. But Sara's father, an attorney himself, represented the tabloid papers in court from time to time. He too knows editors, politicians, judges, etc. Many clients owe him favors—big ones. Not one word appears about the incident in the New York papers.

Both Baker and Kurtz sue Williams, and the City. But, as the principal predicted, no one gets a dime from *him*.

At his Bridge Hampton summer home, the happily, now retired principal, ignoring warnings of a potential storm, takes out a married couple (neophyte sailors) interested in purchasing his 25-foot sailboat named, *The Amazen*. His team of lawyers requires hefty retainers, so the craft has to go. The skipper feeds Marsha and Glean enough drinks to make them tipsy, hoping they will sign on the dotted line. The distant storm's ground swell unleashes a ten-foot high series of waves, capsizing the little craft. *All three are drowned*. Since no one appears to have been wearing life jackets, the couple's relatives sue the late principal's estate for wrongful death. This happened on June 28th. The last day of school.

Life returns to normal in the hallowed halls of I.S. 303. Mrs. Baker retires on a fat disability paycheck. She is interviewed at her hospital bed by a UFT (United Federation of

Teachers) representative who promises to feature her story in the union's monthly newspaper. He persuades her to concentrate on the school's virtues and play down the violent act that in fact, almost killed her. The story is printed, highlighting the teacher's stoicism and accomplishments. The classroom fight gets one lone sentence of copy.

Mr. Russ, who did receive the intern appointment, must find a suitable replacement for Baker—not an easy task. Rome 101 is in total chaos! Years of bent-up anger transform the docile kids into real-life little monsters. We barricade the entrance doors, throw the dreaded text books out the windows and use the chalk board to express our feelings. Murray and I use the chalk-board—the former torture rack—to decorate. Mrs. Baker, the former teacher is being shot, burned at the stake, chased by savage tigers, etc. She could have died. So what. We have no sympathy. None.

One day, Mr. Russ, who had had it “up to here,” pushes the door open, toppling our latest pyramid of chairs. He enters along with a tall young Chinese-American women, whose shapely muscular legs are astride a pair of black rakishly high heels, that the fashion--conscience stranger seems born to wear. A just above the knee, gray pencil skirt and bone-white blouse complete her garb. Over her shoulder falls a handbag that looks just like the one Mrs. Baker used to tote around. She places it on the *window side* of the teacher's desk. “Boys and girls let me introduce Miss Hong, your new teacher. I trust you will give her the respect that is due to her. You have a lot of catching-up to do.” Russ proudly, confidently announces.

Miss Hong is super strict, but actually makes learning the Spanish language fun! She gives moderate length homework assignments, brings in tasty Spanish food, organizes birthday parties—complete with pinatas and lessons in Spanish-style dancing. She is available lunch

times and after school to offer help with the sticky parts of Spanish grammar. In one of the now weekly assemblies, our class performs a series of skits (that we wrote in committees, *ourselves*) featuring Murray Rothstein as Pancho Villa--his head topped with a huge richly decorated sombrero. Little Murray is chased around the stage by Robert dressed as an American soldier brandishing a cardboard gun (Miss Hon explained to me that bringing in a real firearm was not a good idea) Christopher Columbus, and Ponce DE' Long get the treatment too. It's all done in fun; nobody forgets their lines—all recited in genuine Spanish lingo.

While supervising the painting of the skit's sets, the rapidly becoming loquacious Robert, is scurrying about the stage and trips over a pair of black high-heels, belong to his teacher. Running barefoot this way and that, the exited teacher, coffee cup in hand, is having a ball playing director, editing dialogue, assigning tasks, etc.

“Maybe this is the time to ask her,” Robert tells himself, as the mini-skirted, barefoot teacher with a pair of unbelievable legs, helps him off the floor. “Miss. Hong, are you related to William Hong, a friend of my uncle's and my Dad?” the student inquires. “Well, Bob, it's a very common Chinese name—like Smith, Jones. No, I don't think so. Please bring over that flat, *por favor*.”

She's lying. He's her fraternal grandfather. The teacher carries a picture of him in her wallet. She is, undoubtedly, his favorite granddaughter. “Big Bill” is super-proud of her success in her new job. He paid for most of her education. Yes, she's aware of his alleged gang-land connections. Her own parents still living in Chinatown, owning a whole-sale food grocery; where some years ago, little Jenny could be seen sitting in a corner doing her homework assignments, while Ginny-sacks of rice, water chestnuts, and other food-stuffs are carried in and

out in endless procession, replenishing the stocks of hundreds of restaurants. The family is Christian; a minority faction; enrolling all their children to parochial schools. The quiet, shy, oldest daughter is an “average” student, excelling in foreign languages. Jennifer is on her chosen path, becoming, *Our Miss Hong*.

She will miss her grandfather terribly. “Big Bill” is planning to spend his “golden years” far away from Chinatown—maybe Inner Mongolia, where a Buddhist temple and retreat of world-renown would welcome him. The city's newspapers and local new stations carry stories of a power struggle between the old guard and an unwanted influx of violent gangs from Asia. One of Bill's lieutenant's was shot on Mott Street, almost on the exact spot where Robert and Murray met awhile back.

Miss Jennifer Hong knows her private life should never be allowed to be scrutinized by her classes. It was a million-to-one-shot that a student guessed at her family background. She prays that no one would ever suspect that she was sharing an apartment with a member of the male faculty.

The show goes on. The chock-full auditorium is hysterical with laughter—not the mocking, sarcastic kind we have been inured to—but bright approval, culminating in resounding applause.

Class 8-1 learned its lessons well. We all pass. Murray and I getting a solid B+ *Ole!*

When Mr. Russ interviewed prospective new teachers for our unmanageable class, he rejected a host of experienced candidates.. The totally inexperienced Miss Hong was the only one who said that she *loved* kids—especially kids at this very difficult age.

With the situation of 8-1 now under control, Mr. Russ must now turn his attention to a plethora of other problems. He begins by holding separate assemblies for boys and girls. No entertainment here: time to lay down the law. Any boy making inappropriate advances to a girl will be suspended on the spot. Any student caught writing graffiti will be suspended. Any student using drugs will not only be suspended, but turned-over to the police. Anyone harassing-bulling a fellow student will likewise be suspended. If behavior is acceptable, assigned lunch room seating will be abolished. Sit as you choose. After school clubs will be offered: art, music, chess, dancing gymnastics, etc. Any student with an acceptable academic average is encouraged to attend. Assemblies will be weekly, each class required to present some kind of subject-related show. Put a bunch of kids working together, they are no longer competitors, they become friends. They become a *class*.

To speak to the girls, the new principal chooses the new art teacher, Mrs. Kane (Mrs. Wohl gave birth to a bouncing baby girl. She may or may not return). Possessing a guidance counselor's license, she gets the job because she too loves her kids and has taught in some of the cities most challenging schools. She repeats the principal's directives, adding that the archaic dress code will be relaxed. What to wear? "Common sense ladies" And lastly, coed gym classes will be given a try.

This is not just, "the iron fist in the velvet glove". This astute administrator (the *real* hero of our story?) knows that a school is more than a place to learn how to master the mechanics of challenging subjects; rather it must be a place where each and every youngster has the god-given right (the Founding Fathers called it, "the pursuit of happiness") to blossom into complete human beings.

Now it's the faculties turn. With former Principal Williams actually and officially retired, acting-intern Principal Jack Russ calls an emergency meeting. He can't require any teacher to attend any after school meeting not on the calendar. Many teachers are forced to “moonlight;” many have family obligations. In the past, over-zealous principals abused the privilege to say the least. Russ advertises a, “very short, important,” meeting. About half attend. It's 3:30 sharp.

Firstly, he tells his yet uninformed teachers that the school will be integrated. It's not a rumor. He praises their efforts and hopes they return to accept the new challenge that September will bring. He's lying. Sure the staff can handle these kids. Each and everyone started his career in a minority school. Russ knows that like the retired Mrs. Carter, the majority must have been 'costing' for years. Russ can't fire or even transfer a tenured pedagogical employee. Miss Hong is the only teacher who has no legal right to her job. Any tenured in the city can literally kick her out. Remember this is Forest Hills, not the South Bronx. Many of her colleagues would love to see her go. Of course she makes them look bad.

In the short time left, Russ just hints at what he expects in September. The classroom observations that his predecessor limited to ten minute visits, will be full-period. Lessons plans will be discussed within a committee of department chairmen persons, guidance counselors, and himself.

Ultimately, ten teachers retire. No one transfers out (where are they doing to go?) Miss Hong would love to return, but her lack of seniority will undoubtedly prevent it. Only one teacher takes a middle road, a full-year sabbatical leave. Mister Louis Gerber is going to start to have some real fun!

And Vincent Todler? He disappears for five days. His father claims he doesn't know where he is. That's true, and in fact, he suspects his son is out in Miller Place with his Nazi uncle, inventing stories on how the Jews provoked him. Vincent is suspended and with Sara's father's persistence, transferred to a neighboring junior high. Educational law dictates that nothing of the child's history be conveyed to his teachers. Another time bomb waiting to go off? He's I.S. 8's problem now.

XV

Does Robert Stephen Tracz Fall in Love?

In the meantime, just after the incident, Murray and I make a pilgrimage to Sara's hospital room at LIJ: *Long Island Jewish Hospital*. I'm racked with guilt. I ducked! She didn't. Will she throw me out when she sees me? Can I convince her to forgive me?

We enter room 507B. It's brimming with stuffed animals, flowers and get-well cards. A middle-aged couple (presumably her parents) are just leaving the room. Still bed-ridden, text books and teen magazines cover the bed--and there's that usual hospital smell, partially obscured by the forest of freshly-cut flowers. Some are from important people: a U.S. Senator, a Judge, and one opulent bouquet from the new acting-intern Principal.

Sara's face is partially obscured by bandages. A pair of bright brown eyes that escaped injury animate when she sees the two boys from her class—the only two who visited so far. Murray hands her a small bouquet, “from both of us,” he brightly pronounces--his captivating smile, a first step toward another conquest? Murray looks at me and winks! He is in sudden need of a bathroom, even though there's one adjacent to the recuperating student's private room. Now

alone with the injured girl, I venture, “I’m so sorry Sara, God, I wish this never happened. Please forgive me.”

“For what? Not your fault, Robert—or do you like “Bob?” “*Bob* is O.K. Sara. My real friends call me “Bob.”

“You’re *the* class artist. Right? Can you bring me a few pictures to hang up?” she adds, now as giddy as a little tyke.

“Landscapes O.K.?” I reply, now rapidly becoming more comfortable by the second. I “lucked out”—big time!

“Yes please! I loved the one you did of your country lake. Can I have it?”

“Sure it’s yours, if I can find it. Still in school someplace.”

“My Dad says the scumbag who hit me disappeared.” Switching the subject from art to reality is a little disquieting. The next reply could make or break me. “ Vinny was picking on me all the time. Lost my temper, Sara. I would of rather been hit by the chair...”

“Not your fault, Bob. *Would you really have rather been hit?*”

My head is now bowed in an obsequiousness. Tears start flowing. Murray reappears can calls me to the hall.

“Lucky guy! That chick has the hots for you, Shooter.” Not bad looking. It’s your move...kid.” I tell Sara we have to leave. My Mom is in our car double-parked outside. “Can I

visit you tomorrow?" "Sure", she replies. And then with a beckoning finger, she invites me closer to her bed and gives me a little kiss on the cheek.

But Robert is not the boy of yore. That Robert would have fallen for any decent-looking female—especially one who just slightly kissed him. Again, we note, growing up too fast is a blessing and a curse. The rush to adulthood burdens formally free spirits with unforeseen responsibilities. Robert, again only 15, has had sex with a not just a girl, but a beautiful girl—the most beautiful girl he has ever seen. He still thinks the whole encounter was some kind of drug-induced dream Murray thought-up. But no. It's real. This Sara seems to like him. A lot. Should he reciprocate her affections? Why not? Because Sara is not and never could be Merrill. She's pretty, attractive, but not a goddess, no Aphrodite. Her face, if composed of a sculptor's stone, would be more like a Roman portrait bust than a Greek idealization. Individual imperfections just balance-out what society deems desirable, combining a rather uninspired, ordinary work of art. Does she know that right at this moment, this boy Robert is comparing her to Merrill? Does she know that this boy is still emotionally fragile, willing to take any female as a replacement?

Robert thinks she has certain charms: she's very bright; smart, but not arrogantly distant. She seems to know what she wants. Does any boy or man know what females want? What he really likes is her expressed feelings for bucolic environments. On the negative side, she talks too much, is too self-absorbed, and too concerned with "Girly" stuff like cloths, make-up, etc. Later he will find that Sara is also too mature for her age, possessing sexual desires worthy of a middle-aged movie star. She also wants to fall in love with the right person. Maybe that's what girls really want.

Robert wants a friend—a girlfriend. That's all.

In school, the next day, Robert searches in vain for the picture. No dice. Lost. At home, Robert freely paints a copy from memory. It has become a sunrise, not sunset scene. A boy and girl are now in the rowboat. Who is the girl?

The next day, Robert alone, takes two buses to the hospital. Holding more flowers and his painting, the patient greets me with a hug. She has great news! She will be released in only three days. Minor plastic surgery will restore her pretty, juvenile, smooth face to its former self, if not the former glory, it never really possessed. Will he be “beguiled” by what he sees? Will her smile follow him to bed every night? Or will he be haunted by Merrill?

So Robert, now Bob, again, talks to Sara. Is there chemistry? Yes, for sure. Sara has a spontaneous nature, sometimes even a “devil made care” attitude hiding behind her serious, scholarly disposition. She can be immature, even silly. All in all, Bob and Sara really like each others company. A good start. Where will it lead?

Does Bob dare to show her that little book—the ribald flip-book that he picked off the floor in that dingy storage closet? The “in” kids are now calling the dingy room, “The Love Connection.” The ribald little book is in his pocket now. Does Sara know about this room?

It was this book, this little comic book--a sexually explicit animated cartoon-- that caused the fiasco, and near death of a faculty member. Couldn't cost much. Old, falling apart, dilapidated, little “picture show”.

Sara takes the worn little inch-thick volume in her delicate hand, whose fingers still sport a pale pink polish- a vestige of her femininity, now even appearing a more vivid hue, in contrast to the white polka-dotted unisex hospital gown, casually covering her totally naked neat little

body. The robe her parents bought her would cover too much. Sara twists and turns, fidgets, revealing choice tid-bits of breasts, thighs, butt cheeks.

Her pretty thumb manipulates the falling papers. Two cartoon characters are having sex. Nude, the couple possess exaggeratedly large sex organs and breasts move up and down and in and out as the paper pages fall. The man's penis is about two feet long, and the buxom woman, lying legs apart, presents a huge vaginal slit surrounded by mounds of curly pubic hair. Several times she flips the pages. She learns that she can control the speed of copulation with ease. Drooling, the wide-eyed Sara gawks at the animated depiction of sexual intercourse. Before his victory, Robert never would have dared to show a pretty girl such a thing. They giggle, blush, watching the naughty little show till visiting hours are over. She takes Bob's hand and gives him a real kiss on the lips. Should he offer his tongue? She gives hers in a flash, and both engage in some passionate "necking."

When did Romeo forsake his Rosalind in favor of Juliet? Merrill is no way a girl friend, a former love. Murray seems to think Bob can have his pick now. "Shooter. Love is for sissies. All the flowers are there for you to pick! Sara has a nice ass, great tits. Fuck her! Sure. But play the field."

2

"Bob," please go upstate for the weekend. Bridget called saying that there may be a leaky pipe. The plumber, a guy called Ernie Gray will meet you there. I have some shit that can't wait at work. And I would like to see your uncle again," my Dad expostulates in a voice strangely excitable and mellow at the same time. I usually beg him to go upstate, not the other way around.

“Do I *have to* take Stephen along?” I answer. My kid brother is even a more dedicated woodsmen than I am, but for what I am planning this trip, a nuisance, an impediment. A trip upstate with Murray, his Aunt, and little brother? OK. Pack the car! Did I fail to mention that Sara's parents gave permission for her to come too? A leaky pipe? Almost too good to be true!

Murray has been itching to go on an upstate weekend trip. Shooting my .22 pump-action rifle would be an believable thrill. He correctly surmises that Sara and I will be occupied with other pursuits. Murray pledges distracting diversions, his Aunt, “wrapped around his finger.” As we enter Ida's 1970 sky-blue Pontiac Bonneville, I throw my excited friend a three pound, thousand-round box of Super X .22 Winchester target rounds. He jingles the oblong box like a baby with a rattle. We stop at Sara's apartment, my girlfriend and her Mom waiting outside. Mrs. Kurtz is somewhat surprised my parents aren't there. But thank God, she knows Ida, a friend from PTA meetings. My hunting Beagle, tail going a mile a minute, jumps on her, licks her face, our chauffeur's worries now erased.

Traffic is light. After three hours of half listening to boring “girl talk” between Ida and Sara, we arrive at my house: a one story, two bed roomed ranch, featuring white aluminum siding and a newly constructed garage. A beat-up white Chevy van is parked on the gravel driveway. The happy-faced plumber, Ernie Gray, a can of Coors Light—a *silver bullet*, in his hand, relates details of his repairs. Not a big job. No water to mop-up. “I'll take care of you city folk,” Mister Gray proudly expostulates. Dad and Mom will be revealed that there is no serious water damage.

We unpack quickly. My hound, Billy is heard baying in the woods, in hot pursuit of a rabbit. Ida starts to cook, Murray wants to shoot, and Sara begs a ride on my little row boat, waiting on the far side of the pond. "It's just like your painting, Bob!" *My girl's* response. She's dressed in modest loose-fitting pants called "pedal-pushers," brand-new sneakers, a non-revealing country-red blouse, her ankle adored with a gold bracelet: my gift, similar to the one that graced Merrill's enticing ankle.

Hand in hand, we walk down to the boat dock. My pockets are stuffed with stale bread that I scatter on the water, like a farmer sowing seeds. "H-E-R-E T-H-E-Y C-O-M-E! The marshal calls the pacers..." I shout. I'm mimicking the announcers call at "Monticello Raceway" --the "little track on the prairie," where Dad picked eight-out-of-nine winners. Like his brother and father, he has an eye for women too, so Mom makes sure her unfaithful husband invests his cash: a county house? Why not!

An armada of little fish attacks the floating morsels like hungry piranhas. Two-foot-long emerald green shapes emerge from the cool depths and circle the feeding sunfish. "Hey, that's *Hamlet*, See the scare under the dorsal fin! And here's *Macbeth*!"

"You named the Bass!" Sara shouts, clapping her hands, jumping up-and-down like she was leading a cheer back in school.

"How did you know they're *Bass*," I inquire.

"Summer camp. Remember. I love to fish, Bob. Can we try? What about swimming?"

“This water is too dirty. Dad hasn't got around to building a pool yet. Tomorrow I'll take t to my big boat on the reservoir. There's a hidden cove called Hollister Brook—an easy row—where we caught the big guys in here. It wasn't easy, but Steve and I put them in buckets and carried them home. I often take a dip after fishing. Bring a bathing suit?”

“Yup. Hope you like it.”

“You're not allowed to swim in the reservoir, but who's to know? Water's ice-cold, Sara. Gives ya Goosebumps! Come to think about it, I have a newspaper clipping someplace telling about a group of smoked-up hippies who got caught skinny-dipping there last week...Better lay off...”

“Sounds like fun...”

“What?”

“Skinny-dipping! The girls at camp sneak a dip now and then.”

For a moment, I stop to visually construct a vision of young women bathing au naturelle. Maybe my imaginary sirens are inspired by Renoir's buxom bathing-beauties at the Met. Sara and Merrill, naked as peeled shrimp, are romping in the nude with five or six other girls. They giggle and give me a splash. “Come on in. The water's fine.”

In the car, when I was allowed to get a word in edgewise, I questioned my girl about her summer camp. Sara, like Vincent, is a counselor in training—a C.I.T. As a kid, she went there, graduated to assistant status, till the day she becomes a group leader, a counselor herself. Her Dad, a lawyer, is part owner of the 25-acre complex. When Murray's Aunt finally shuts-up, Sara,

in a naughty whisper, tells of the racy social life senior counselors indulge in. She stops short of telling it all. An adult is present.

Right now, if we are ever to go for a boat ride, we better get cracking. The country air is filled with the odors of barbequed food. It's lunch time. Murray and Steve wanna shoot. We shove-off; can't help but to face each other in the 10-foot row boat-- our now bare feet can't help being intertwined. Not missing a stroke with her oars, Sara imitates a game of footsie. I enjoy seeing her compact little torso bend and lean in response to the demands of the little craft's six-foot oars. Her eyes immobile, focused on me; her tinny toes bent like little rakes, travel up and down my very large masculine pods, daring to climb my thigh, and finally reaching my bulging crotch. Her big toe, decorated with a dark mauve polish, dances a gentle and yet forceful tango. I reciprocate, grabbing her feet with mine, exploring the spaces between her tarsals with my big toe. Should I dare to repeat the favor of her overtly sexual caress? She may throw me overboard ! I do. She doesn't—throw me in the drink! Is she offering me an innocent tease? Or is this start of something else?

Since I lost my virginity to Merrill, the sex act has become something of an obsession. Master's and Johnson's series on human sexual response is in the local library. I repeatedly take it out, ignoring the lady Liberian's inquisitive stares. "It's for my Mom," I reply. Dad brings me the famous *Strand Bookstore* on Cooper Square, ostensibly to search for art books. I leave with Rubin's "*Every thing you wanted to know...*," *Playboy* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, and a copy of *Human Anatomy For The Artist*. I even dare to purchase an astrological poster illustrating the twelve basic positions for intercourse, corresponding with astrological signs. Leo is "creative," favoring a vertical "69" position, where the man holds his partner upside down, cunnilingus and

fellatio enrapture both lovers, as long as the male's strength holds out. Sorry Rembrandt and Turner. First things first! I'll add your art books to my library soon enough.

To think that month's before, I got embarrassed when our cute female biology teacher taught us about, "vegetative propagation".

After lunch, our favorite weekend neighbors appear, the Smiths. Aunt Ida "hits it off," with Bridget, and is invited to see her family retreat nestled beside, a cool "babbling brook". Her son, another Steve, also expert in the use of firearms, will come over and supervise Murray's shooting spree. All this soon transpires. We set-up at a near by veranda, an often used backdrop containing plywood boards, almost totally splintered by blasts from high-powered deer rifles, shot guns, and the little 22's.

It turns out that Murray is not a crack shot, but with continuing practice he improves. Steve and I are much more successful, being about equal in ability. Sara wants to try a few shots, never even holding a rifle before. She is fascinated by the little "pop gun," a masculine weapon that her juvenile feminine hands explore like a newly fond string of pearls, extricated from Captain Kidd's treasure chest. We almost surrender our individual identities, as I intertwine our hands, around the rifle. She shoots, misses everything. After repeated attempts, she hits the target. Under my tutelage, my girlfriend (who happens to be Jewish) will be able to hit, "the broadside side of a barn."

The three remaining shooters are becoming impatient. We gladly acquiesce, and return to the house, empty except for my exhausted Beagle, who is pawing his bowl, wanting some water. We don't say a word. Providence has been kind, so far.

Now would be a good time for a stroll in the woods. Sara wants to see deer, a valid excuse if anybody questions where we've going. She has become used to seeing my hand, a trusting guide, revealing bucolic delights, one right after another. I lead her willing hand on. We stop at the opened garage piled-up with targets, fishing rods, old targets, etc. An old picnic basket would work as tangible evidence of our intentions. I stuff it with an old blanket, its intention being used to encase a carcass of an unfortunately careless deer. But it's clean enough. We stop at the house and add two ice-cold cans of *Coors* to the bundle. We swore on the perpetual stack of Bibles that there would be no drinking. But how can Aunt Ida not see the pile of beer cans protruding from the garbage pit adjacent to the woods? Sara and I certainly did not add to these.

About 100 yards across from our field, the woods appear. We cross some rusted barbed-wire, and and pass over an old dilapidated stone fence, betraying the fact that this land was a time earlier a farmer's property. Almost immediately, we find ourselves on a ancient path devoid of thickets and brambles that surround the matted grass. Tall maple and oak trees—personal friends of mine—play hide as seek, partially blotting the hot noonday sun, an unwanted giant eye. It's cool, comforting, my real own, “Paradise” garden. We reach a clearing, an old meadow that once was used to rest dairy cows. His is where Mister Rubin almost shot my Dad. The comforting silence, only punctuated by chirping birds is broken. An audible thunder of hoofs and a flash of at least three pure white tails, startle us. “Deer Sara. Deer Sara! I whisper, in a calm, but excited voice. You wanted to see deer. Be quiet and be still.” I feel like a magician, conjuring-up an apparition for an excited crowd. “We were treading on a deer run, used long before houses and farms were built here.” She doesn't respond. Immobile, except for her craning head, yearning to get a view of an entire deer. I venture a lecture about animal husbandry,

guessing that the cervine beauties are by now far away. “Deer only mate in the fall, Sara. The alpha male, the strongest buck, corrals his does, chasing away all pretenders to his throne. He sharpens his antlers on small trees. They call it “Rutting”. If you look around, you'll see old ruts everywhere. Sara listens, almost spellbound. She now knows I'm a master hunter as well as an artist and good friend-- her guide, and maybe soon, her lover.

“The horny guy impregnates every one of his harem, running throughout his domain. It's then that he's careless and makes mistakes. That's the only time we could ever bag him.”

“I guess you shot deer too, Bob. But they're so beautiful.”

“If I don't somebody else will.” Then I explain the overpopulation problem, the lack of predators, etc. “Sure it's exciting. I make sure my deer goes down fast, hopefully without pain. “They call me *Machine-gun Bob*. But Sara, I just love being here. I really couldn't care less if I get a deer or not.” With a forgiving nod, she kisses me on the lips, and unfolds the blanket from the box. It's picnic time. We don't sit, just stand, staring into each other's love-filled eyes. With her hair in pig tails, she's just another country girl, now attempting to do what country girls have been doing from time in memorial.

She unbuttons her pale pink blouse, and starts to remove her bra. The clasp seems a little stuck, so I circle to her back and guide her fingers work it loose. It is dark brown, laced with delicate embroidery, a very mature-looking piece of underwear. Her breasts are beautiful, full, youthful-- now needing no garment to defy the pull of gravity. Her nipples are light pink, not at all like the dark brown nubs found on the male chest. Little pimples circle the almost inch-long luscious, inviting worship, just begging to be fondled, caressed, and lovingly sucked.

She UN-zippers her fly, walks out of her checker-board slacks, and kicks off her sneakers. Now naked, except for pretty pale-green tie-died bikini-style panties, that have the peace sign printed all over them. Sara then places her hands at her side, her thumb and forefinger now finding the ultra-thin little string that keeps front and back together.

While she stretches the garment, her ample hips preforms a slow-motion hula that finally unleashes it, falling slowly, landing tangled between her pretty shoe-less feet.

She's no modest Venus, painted by a Sando Botticelli. No stream of curvilinear red hair hides her pubis from a viewer's eyes. A jet-black mound of pubic hair is presenting as the center of overt, natural, greedy sexuality. I'm almost hypnotized by its sight.

She takes a step closer, wraps her arms about my waist, then offers her mouth and tongue to me. While we passionately kiss, she removes my pants, shirt, under wear. My hands, intern circle her waist, I pinch a small role of fat resting just above her sweat-ass looking butt cheeks. As I pull them wide, squeeze and pinch, the nude girl's coos and moans have become another signal of the Earthy ritual that the every animal in the woods enjoyed. Could her cries of pleasure be mistaken for the mating call of the wood-land dove?

We are now both completely naked. Sara's last vestige of civilization is only the golden anklet girdling her tinny left foot. Her painted toes bend, her heels raise high, now becoming her body's only support, as she ventures to expand her reach upward, pulling her short little female shape up next to the proudly-tall boy. My throbbing penis, now pointing skyward, sandwiched between our bodies is now discovered, caressed by both her hands. With my shaft learning

upward, the scrotum is quite uncovered, aching for attention. Her fingers gently massage the sight, my testicles tingle in ungodly pleasure.

We are now performing what is called a “nude embrace.” According to a sex pole I recently read, only 16 percent of teens our age has gone this far. I bet in our school the number would be closer to zero (Murray and his super-horny clan, not included).

We allow our legs to slowly collapse, as each partner holds their lover's torso, our naked backsides simultaneously finding a resting sight on the soft, convoluted brown blanket. Our legs automatically intertwine; the heels of our feet digging-- almost locked into each others ass cheeks. I tenderly suck on her erect nipples, offering a miniature bite here and there. Her head reseeds backwards, her cute braided pig tails falling over her creamy pale shoulders. She then bends, tilting her head sideways and returns the favor. I had no idea my nibbles would respond to her rolling tongue and tender little nips.

My naked butt is firmly atop my pile of cloths. I bend to the side and pull out my wrinkled pants. My sweat-laden hand digs into a deep pocket and then removes a ready-rolled latex condom. Sara smiles, shaking her head as if dismissing my offering. “No Bob, it's the time in my cycle that I could never get pregnant. I want *you* inside me *now*. Sara falls to her back, her legs forming an obtuse angle pointing to the sky. I carefully mount her; she lifts her hips a little while my blood-engorged penis hunts for an opening. It travels up and down her soaking outer lips, finally finding itself engulfed in the forest of course curly hair. Now I'm experienced enough to know that I must dismiss any thoughts of the past or future—be in the moment, if you will.

Her vagina feels hot as melted butter, and for the first time, my naked cock is totally exposed—not girdled in plastic, allowing to bathe in primal liquid lubrication, not encased in a plastic glove. My ass-cheeks tighten. My in-an-out penal thrusts an added visible turn-on to the two star-crossed lovers. I delay as much as I dare; eventually increasing speed till short multiple spasms release my white-hot seamen into her. Her legs now wrapped around my ass, her ankles locked, crises-crossed; her toes bending and pushing at the air like those on a new-born babe. I exhale a moan, sounding like a bull moose in heat. At the same time her ecstatic cry joins mine, an audible poem of joint ecstasy echoes threw the silent watching woods.

After I pull-out, Sara places her finger inside herself, brings it to her lips and licks my seamen. Her pussy is covered with the glistening milk-white liquid, and she is in no hurry to clean it off. The sound of distant gunshots tells that we have a little time to rest. We cuddle, still naked; my lover's head nestled on my shoulder, her eyes gently closing, as do mine.

How long we slept is anyone's guess. We awake together—even yawn together too. Thank god, Murray hasn't used-up his thousand rounds. He's still shooting.

What do you now say to the girl who just gave herself entirely to you? I love you. You're my Cleopatra, my Bathsheba, and my Honey Bun. Or maybe, “Remember, we're not in high school yet, girl. Nice roll in the hay...now let's eat...” Sara, always the blabbermouth, breaches the wall of silence. “You know Bob, I fell for you when you visited me. There was a kindness in your eyes-- a softness in your touch.”

“Well I was so guilty. I didn't know much about anything. You'll one Hell of a girlfriend, babe. We better get back. Hear any more shots?”

We get dressed in a hurry, dusting grass and removing acorns from our shoes and cloths. We help each other, and in a way, I feel more intimate now than when we were doing it. Sara's become the sister I never had. But we made love. But aren't we too young for long-lasting commitments?

I inquire why she hasn't cleaned my come from her vagina. She answers that she wants *me* inside her as long as possible. "Sara, knock it off. If you got pregnant...my parents...your parents...school..."

"I'm sure its OK. Stop being a worrywart", she answers in a scolding tone, in between licking my seamen off her index finger, just like it was the last of a vanilla shake on the bottom of a plastic McDonald's container.

O.K. I'm a dumb-ass, stupid, mother f... ass-hole. Of course I'm going to worry. The books all said that a women's menstrual is erratic. But like millions of men before me, I let passion override reason. I'll try to enjoy the wonderful relationship this could be. But I still feel a fool, betrayed by my youth and the girl who says she loves me. What now?

"By the way, did I do O.K.?" I ask, knowing that I did fine.

"Of course silly goose!" Sara tells her lover. She tells me she reached climax multiple times. I recalled that when I sucking on her tits, her spine quivered. I could feel the eruption, her pleasure in rolling tinny little waves. She tells me she masturbates constantly, her imagination potent enough to make her come without using any manual stimulation. Remember the sex manual saying something about nymphomania, Robert? Of course she wasn't a virgin. Of course

Murray must have fucked her. Orgies at camp and group sex? Am I the luckiest guy in the world or just another fool?

As we slowly leave the meadow, hand in hand as usual, my heart stops beating. Ten years in the woods, has never granted me the sight right before my eyes. The biggest Buck I ever saw is standing right out in the open—a ten-pointer for sure! Probably the same animal we startled before. His doe and fawn all are there too. Will Sara and I someday marry?

Should I talk to this vision from the forest primeval? Should I tell him how he is graced with power, might and fortitude? In the scheme of things, are humans worth more than his species? Instinct and only instinct guides his destined path. To a devout Buddhist, Hindu, or a 18th century deist, his life is as precious as the beings that let reason guide them through life's serendipitous joys and sorrows.

“Thanks for letting us see you, majestic stag. I'll never forget you,” I further soliloquize. He turns, performs a giant leap over the thickets, his family follows, a triad of pure white fur seems to salute us, as the family retreats into their world--a world that man can only visit, but never be a part of. With a little luck and his keen instincts, the noble animal will, I pray, “move freely along the path to which he is destined”. Robert will never hunt again.

“What are you thinking about Honey?” My lover asks. “

No. Nothing, Dear. Let's hope the water in the reservoir tomorrow isn't too cold!”

Sara and I finally leave the woods. But there's something going on. Too many cars are parked outside my house. Something happened; the guns? Billy lost?

Ida calls to us: "Bob, your Dad's on the phone. Your Uncle has passed away."

Shaken, but thunderstruck, I grab the phone and hear my Dad's voice. He pleads, "Bob, please come home." He too, does not appear in a tizzy.

"Of course Dad. Tomorrow mourning. We leave at dawn. An early start as you say. Were you there when he passed?"

"Yes, thank God. Chubby, Anna, Ray Angelia, and Big Bill too? Remember him?"

"Sure, Murray was impressed. *But why that Big Bill?* Did Uncle Joe owe him money too."

"Money? Who the hell knows? Nobody's going to get a dime, Bob. They were talking about something. Who knows what?" my Dad answers, with an agitated voice.

"Probably some kind of Buddhist ritual or something. Did he mention me?" Did he have a priest?" I inquire.

"Yes, your Uncle said he loved you, Bob. And he did have last rites."

On the return trip, everyone tells me I should not feel guilty about not being at his bedside. He was in the Veteran's hospital almost a month. He could have gone anytime. My mind is more occupied with tangible concerns about how we left the house in order. The plumbing, electricity, all had to be shut-down the proper way. This is the first time that I, not my Dad, did

the job. Of course, how could I not dismiss thoughts about the girl who is sincerely consoling me. And yes, I am a worry-wart. How much is an abortion these days?

Funerals have come and gone; thankfully the deceased was usually someone I barely knew. Uncle Joe's send-off will be etched in my memory because he is the first person who I loved, who died. I will be forced to see him, embalmed, made-up looking peaceful and content, a rosary in his cold, stiff hands. I nudge closer to Sara, resting my head on her shoulder.

XVI

Aim: What is a Catholic Funeral like?

For a man who earned the title of swindling-thief, tax evader, and adulator, Joseph Stephen Tracz's funeral was, as all such rites were conceived to be, a celebration of homage and heat-felt love. The threat of a mass boycott never materialized. Those whose choice was to not attend the wake, sent flowers in such abundance, two cars were employed to carry them to the Veteran's Military Cemetery on Long Island: *Pine Lawn*. Joseph Tracz literally started life with nothing. Denied a caring mother, being forced to leave school and work, must have been horrible. Against all odds he reached the heights, then plummeting all too quickly. In his travels either up or down, there was something that made him appear unique, maybe even loveable. Many who knew the man are here.

The *Fox Family Funeral Home*, just a stone's throw from the private streets hosting Forest Hills Gardens, was the logical choice to hold the Catholic rites. The embalmed corpse, whose crossed hands held the rosary, was the center of religious regalia that circled the moderately-priced casket. My Dad was especially proud of the opulent wreath that made its way

from a 3ed. Avenue flower shop that supplied many known gangster funerals. My bouquet, a modest affair sat, right next to his.

Monseigneur Johnston was quite surprised at the ethnic diversity manifested by the mourners. An ecumenical assortment of Jews from many congregations, Italians, Irish, and Greeks shared the pews with a majority of Chinese-Americans—some Buddhist, some Christian. All still resided in Manhattan, except the one negro man who made the pilgrimage from South Jamaica, Queens: Charlie “Leo” Jones, a rubbish contractor, who knows he will never collect the ten grand he allowed himself to be “hoodwinked” out of. Like all the others owed hefty amounts of cash, he quells his animosity, replacing it with a genuine feeling of admiration. In the fall, his twin granddaughters, Jackie and Gwen will be bussed to I.S. 303. The Gemski girls will have fellow twins to talk to.

Emotionally, no one in the entourage is a “basket case.” Tears are shed, payers offered, etc. Multiple conversations, most not surprisingly, are center around money. It's obvious that the late contractor must have, “put a little something away for a rainy day”.

XVII

AIM: What Does, “It's Not Over Till it's Over” Mean?

As fate would have it, just weeks before my martial art training began, a far-sighted, clever entrepreneur converted a dry cleaning store, and a plumbing contractor's warehouse, into the first martial arts studio in central Queens. The wall that was once a barrier between the two defunct businesses was demolished, revealing a cavernous interior, almost as large as the boy's half I.S. 303's gym. It's visible red-brick walls now covered with whitewash, host a series of

brand-new thick plastic mats that buffer combatants, who may ricochet here and there, as they punch, kick, attack their honored opponents. The classes start at 8:AM. They continue till 9:00 PM.

There are many fine teachers: some Chinese, some Japanese, and some Caucasian. The main man—the Alpha Male—is Ray Grafton (a Chuck Norris clone), a former Hollywood stunt man, whose teaching methods and motivational techniques would impress Jack Russ, our new principal. After all, this is a private school--not a government bureaucratic institution, where the students must partake what's offered on the plate, even if it's withered, stale and old.

Not one student is dissatisfied. Pudgy, out-of-shape kids are given special attention. Groups of little tykes work under the watchful tutelage of female masters, reminiscent of their motherly beloved primary-grade teachers. The kindergarten-aged students emotional and physical progress are monitored, as if being watched by the keen eyes of benevolent hawks. After three months in business, there's a waiting list to get in. Other locations will eventually open, serving this new national craze: Karate!

Our beloved Miss Jennifer Hong, before she accepted the challenge of the middle grades, was herself a teacher in a martial arts school. She earned the highest honor, a black belt, symbolic of the potentially lethal citadel its wearer's body has become. Her live-in boyfriend, Mister Louis Gerber rates himself something of an athlete, but possess a *Glass Jaw*, and couldn't, “punch his way out of a paper bag.” When the pair made their farewell appearance on the motorcycle, they cemented all the rumors, and gossip that prevailed amongst teachers and students, as the school term drew to its inexorable conclusion. Gerber, or “Darling Louis” decided to take lessons too, but in a different school, far away from preying eyes.

Why does everybody want to learn how to fight? The American obsession with violence is redefined as the *Kung Fu* movie! Bruce Lee, Steve Segall, Jackie Chan, Steve Morris, achieve super-star status. Even the master spy, playboy, licensed to kill 007 has a fall or two with the actress, an actual Judo master, Honor Blackman: "Pussy Galore." Rough and tumble action spiced with primitive special effects, fake blood and gore, fill the movie houses with loads of fans. The only danger here may be the predilection of young people imitating the make-believe violence. Video games, comic books, TV shows are another form of the "survival of the fittest" traditions are still inherently knotted in American Pop culture.

Ray Grafton's school teaches confidence, discipline, pride. Trophies and salutations are won and lost under controlled conditions. Both student and teacher never really crave an altercation that could cause serious injury, even death.

Metropolitan Avenue is the last place one would expect a serious fight to occur. Half shut down by the time the Martial Arts school closes, traffic reduced to a few passing cars and a one-per-hour B-36 Tri-Borough Coach Line Bus. The few passing pedestrians, mostly young couples emerging from, "*O' Neil's Irish Pub*," are well-behaved,--just a little tipsy.-certainly not in anyway, "drunk." They often point to their giant distorted shadows, produced on the sidewalk by their silhouetted figures that are blocking the light beams of passing trucks and cars. With the exception of the shinny-new martial arts school, one could mistake this New York City Avenue for a sleepy thoroughfare in any middle-sized American town. In fact, *Eddie's Sweat-Shop*, substantially unchanged since the 1930's, often hosts film crews trying to capture its archaic ambiance for some commercial production. It doesn't close till ten, so a few budding marital artists usually wind-up throwing their will-power to the night, and thoroughly enjoy the calorie-

filled homemade treats at *Eddie's*. Ray Grafton resists; but often treats himself to a beer at *O' Neil's Irish Pub*.

It was a night in June—the 18th exactly, when Murray and I emerged from the school-- and not by ourselves. Merrill Greenbaum has joined her friends. Our school's star cheerleader has become totally board with her ballet classes; and the after-school gymnastics club is simply not challenging enough. When she becomes aware that we are taking class here, she enrolls. Her stately athletic figure-- ever gorgeous, even encased in the loose-fitting traditional white robe, is quite a sight. The golden anklet is still entrancing one pretty foot, whose toes are now painted a semi-lustrous pale pink. And with those feet, she quickly learns how to kick like a mule.

How many times during class, did I feel like shouting-out that this supreme example of juvenile femininity, was once my lover! Back in school how many kids, whom I daily pass in the halls know about the favors she afforded me in the “Love Connection” storage room? She's a trophy, but she's not really mine. Murray shuts-up like a clam when I finally inquire about his relationship with her. And then, there's Sara.

Even before we made love in the woods at my upstate home, Sara had been my constant companion. We walk home together, go to movies together, do our homework together, etc. We even showered together when her parents left to visit some friends for a weekend. This time, we used protection when we made love on her parent's plush king-size bed. I wouldn't dare to spend the night, “shacking-up, as they call it. How much does either of our parent's know of our mature physical relationship is a nagging question, for *me* at least. Sara tells me we are fated to be together. Reminders of our immaturity fall on her deaf ears.

But now, some serious impediments are arising. Sara's grades are no longer amongst the higher echelon. She is no longer “National Honor Society” member. Her guidance counselor tells her parents that colleges now check on middle-school grades. He correctly surmises that Sara is distracted by teen-age infatuation. Mister and Mrs. Kurtz want to meet with *my* parents as soon as possible. The invitation is declined. They wrongly guess that there is a strong Jewish prejudice directed at their Polish son. The families exchange phone conversations, setting temporal limits to time we spend together. All agree that we are both not mature enough to offer lasting commitments at this tender age.

In a way, I'm not too upset. My little Jewish temptress is making me feel like a hen-pecked husband. She has involved herself with every facet of my life. Her recent plastic surgery is the only reason she is not walking home with me on this fatal night. She could have been seriously hurt *again*. All in all, “going slow” may have avoided another, “shit-load” of problems.

Right in the middle of karate class, she calls me to see how I'm doing. A fellow cheerleader, she recognizes Merrill's grunts and screams, while the blond beauty flips willing male students around like rag dolls. Sara had no idea that she was taking class with me. Now will, “jealousy that green-eyed monster...” transform my cute little brown-eyed clinging female, into a suspicious brown-eyed hag?

Something else to worry about. The Alpha-male Buck, up in the Kerhonkson woods doesn't “worry” about anything. No hunters in the woods, but speeding cars, disease, and the omnipresent serendipitous disaster could nail him and his ever-growing family. Wonder how's he's doing up there? I wonder how I'm doing down here?

We start to walk home, postponing a stop at *Eddie's* for a later day. We'll take our time, treading throughout in the cool night breezes, that feel-like a myriad of miniature fans dismissing the perspiration still beading on our skin. The tired martial arts students will clean-up and shower soon enough.

Murray, never seems to tire at all. The “Downtown” city lights attract him like a moth to a flame. But Murray is Murray, and he wouldn't get burnt. He wants to have a beer in the Irish Pup! As always, he's aware of potential surveillance issues. Ray Grafton drove away in his car. No problem there. My best friend's wallet, a cornucopia of goodies are there for him to use: prophylactics, a few maharaja cigarettes and a few fake ID's. In those days, no picture was required on a driver's license. I believe that only I am aware that he is involved with the Jewish Defense League, and when questioned, Murray never denies it. At school, unknown to all, are sons and daughters of active members, and Murray naturally becomes one of their crowd. What clandestine operations he actively involved himself with is still an answered question. Someone gave him fake identifications. He now gives one to me. Unbelievably, Miss Greenbaum has her own.

Merrill and I are quite tall and mature-looking. Murray's height deprivation is another matter. Before we decide to give it a go, the ever-whimsical devil-may-care too good-looking to be true, 8th grader, sports her usual giggle, wanting to know were she can buy plastic ears to make her little friend the first Jewish-American-Irish Leprechaun. Murray is steamed. We stop at the Tavern's door, a jukebox is playing rock-n-roll. Let's give it try. Merrill is *Merrill*, and would love a cold one.

The place is rocking. This is an “adult” retreat, though a few kids are playing the video games. A whole bunch congregates around a long bowling game that clinks and chatters like a big mechanical toy. There's one tinny circular table in the back, situated just under gallery of photographs, many appearing to host genuine autographs. It was almost as if the management didn't wish their proud gallery of famous Irish heroes to be obscured by paying customers. These seats would always be the last to be occupied in this family-oriented local bar. The bartender, an aging short little man, whose rakish gray sideburns and bright blue eyes, would make a fellow drinker, swear he was in Dublin, not New York City. “Mike” projects Irish charm, and genuine affability. But will he let the teens in?

After acting-out a genuine perusal of our fake proofs, he winks an eye and points his gray bearded chin to the one unoccupied space—in a back. Beautiful! Any cop who happens to enter may not see us. An Irish cop....Have one on us!

Murray, always, the pint-sized cavalier, meanders through the forest of tables and chairs, occupied by drinking adults, making a bee-line for the one vacant table. In no way could the beautiful blond be inconspicuous. She sits right under an autographed picture of Maureen O'Hara of *How Green Was My Valley* and *The Quiet Man*. Would any of the surrounding “Harps” believe that I lost my virginity to this very real teenage heart-throb sitting next to me? Bob is still Bob, and as usual waiting for the roof to fall in. But things are going O.K. Murray has guessed right yet again.

We order three large *Ginness Stout*, right from the tap. Unbelievably, there's no charge! The bill has been taken care off. An unknown very young, but mature-looking male, rises from a large centrally-placed table that appears to be occupied by a group of at least ten friends, all

having a good time, hoisting drink after drink. The tallest of the clan then offers his tankard in salute. It's Jimmy Burke, the scoundrel who tripped me in the hallway! Since Vincent Todler was suspended and transferred, his former sidekick was removed from 8-1 by the ever astute A.P. We often passed each other in the halls, our eyes deliberately avoiding a visual confrontation. In the cafeteria, we hear he is truly sorry for harassing me. Vincent did terrible, pointless things. The Principal's hair would stand on end if he really knew.... Todler was planning to really hurt Murray. Robert could wait. But he wanted that book. It was all Vinny's fault. James has become a Leopold without his Leb.

Fifteen years later, our children will fish together on my little upstate pond. His son, John catches one of *Hamlet's* descendants, and releases the trophy-sized Bass to swim another day. Like his father, he's a real sportsman--good people. James was beguiled by the Devil. Now this path is set on the true and narrow. Sometimes, fate is kind.

It's getting late. Our parents and Murray's aunt will be worried. We leave, just after one drink. We thank the bartender, and Murray, never cash-deprived, leaves a five dollar tip. He's pulled it off again! Now I'm drinking with the Irish. I'm growing-up really fast! Maybe I made another friend.

We plan to walk to my house first. My Mom will, as usual be waiting for her son. She's happy that I'm doing well in class, the original purpose of the lessons (to give me a fighting chance against Vinny), a faded memory, in all probably shared by the trio walking the quiet streets alone, this Tuesday evening.

We turn a corner; we are now on a side street, a few residential windows still offering a guiding illumination to our cautious, slow-moving feet.

A heavy wooden object—a long piece of wood, slams against my back, knocking me off my feet. Two figures, their masculine outlines appear as sketched from a piece of charcoal, are racing at Murray. Together the pair grab his arms, pulling and tugging him, while his airborne feet kick at a target not within their feeble reach. Stunned, I regain my footing and see Merrill kick one the pair in the face—a basic karate move she is expert in. He rears, falls, releasing Murray. Merrill, no longer a placid Aphrodite, but now, in the manner of Bellona, the Roman Goddess of War, produces a Hellish scream as she grabs the hair of the taller of the two, spinning him like an unbalanced top. Murray is totally free to savagely thrust at the other's solar plexus.

The original attacker tries to hit me again. But this time, my arm repels the blow. For a split-second, he is vulnerable. My fist crushes his face. The night air crackles with the sound of broken cartilage and bone. All three are now twisting on the ground, their multiple agonies, offering a baleful, dissonant chorus to our unsympathetic ears.

Two of attackers appear to be full-grown adults of high school age at least. The third is Vincent Todler.

Unbeknownst to us, two men sitting in a dark green Ford sedan have been watching the whole thing. Clad in dark casual cloths, they leave the car and approach us. Murray seems to know at least one of the pair. They start to converse in Hebrew, but soon (maybe in deference to Murray's friends)), use colloquial English. They are Israeli agents—real spies—not Hollywood actors, who have been shadowing Murray the entire ten months while he stayed in New York.

The taller of the two goes by the name “Mordechai” He's the same “guardian angel” who caught Murray with his pants down screwing-around with Sharon's daughter back in Tel Aviv. He's very upset to say the least. I gathered that Murray has been secretly becoming involved with the Jewish Defense League, making the Major's son a potential target of not only Arab terrorists, but neo-Nazi fanatics, and an assortment of wacko's—all who hate the JDL.

With the assurance and confidence of expert agents, they frisk the semi-consciences men, finding switch-blade knives, an ice pick, and an assortment of drugs. On Todler, they discover a can of Ronson Lighter fluid and a Zippo lighter. Like *Flashman*, the fictitious bully of *Tom Brown's School Days*, the little cock-sucker would have tried to put us on fire!

We all agree that calling the NYPD would not be a good idea. Murray is going home very soon. The Major doesn't want publicity. We all pile-in the car. Mordechai offers a fond farewell to the vanquished interlopers. He kicks all three multiple times. A shoulder holster is visible under his jacket. It holds a 9mm semi-automatic with a military silencer. The gun was zeroed-in on Vincent's head as soon as he appeared from the darkness. If he chose Murray as his primary target, the senior agent, often referred to as, “The Final Solution,” would have produced a scene not dissimilar to my surrealistic contrivance our narration began with. He would have literally blown his head off.

While riding home, Murray is scolded again and again. Later he tells me the agents can't believe this confrontation had its roots in I.S. 303. They have watched the student dismissal many times. Nice kids. College bound. It had nothing to do with the JDL.

The agents are dumfounded. It was a great fight boys and girl. This Merrill is something else. Girls like her haven't graced the streets of ancient Israel since Sheba seduced Solomon.

The packed car arrives at my house. Mom's concerned visage is seen peeking threw the Venetian blinds. Merrill wants to meet her. The “guardian angels” insist on driving their little charge home right now. Mom, dressed for the night, is at first embarrassed when we step into the bright illumination offered by the kitchen's florescent light. Her hair in curlers, she's certainly not prepared to entertain—especially at this late hour. Like everyone else on Planet Earth, she's impressed with my fellow martial arts student. The pair “hit it off.” Merrill and Mom have “bumped into” each other at I.S.303. Both vividly remember the day. Mrs Tracz is always uneasy when Sara is around. Maybe because this Nordic-looking girl doesn't fit the Jewish stereotypes, she's more than just comfortable with her.

My rib cage is throbbing with pain. Mom produces an ice-pack that she and Merrill place on my aching side. The wound is easily explained. We con-coct a plausible account of a karate lesson that got a little out-of-hand. Mom volunteers to drive Merrill home; of course, I will accompany them back to Merrill's apartment on Burns Street. I sit in the rear of our 1988 Ford Station wagon, while the girls talk-up a storm. Mom brags about her former gymnastic abilities. The conversation then turns to fashion, jewelry, make-up-- “girl talk.”

We leave Mom temporarily alone, our car's emergency lights flashing on an off. She's double-parked, but awaits her son's return. In the slowly ascending elevator, Merrill curls her arms around me and passionately offers kisses that I return with glee. This is not the mechanical “love play” she imitated many months ago. She knocks on her apartment door and enters. Our eyes meet, no parting words are said.

Murray is going is back to Israel. I have just vanquished the terrible foe that has made my former life a living Hell. Sara is going away to summer camp. But we plan to make love on weekend trips. How often have we professed unending love for each other? How much more complicated can my teenage life get? Why did Merrill kiss me?

One thing for sure, I did grow-up way too fast. Would I rather be reincarnated as the noble stag that who still haunts my consciousness till the present day? We will both experience pain and suffering, as we walk our chosen paths. But his way is nature's way. Worry and dark regret will always accompany humans on their chosen path. Maybe the “enlightened one *The Buddha*, freed himself of civilizations ephemeral delights, however wonderful they may be, are never everlasting. His chosen road was an internal path; Robert's could never be so.

Fate has been kind to him and many of his friends-- so far. But the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune....” suddenly hurls Robert's triumphs and joys into a dark abyss. On the evening news, June 29th, 1972, a major story tells about an Israeli military transport plane that took-off from Floyd Bennet Field, disappearing from radar scans somewhere over the Mediterranean Sea. My God, it is Murray's plane. So far, no wreckage or survivors were found.

What happens next is another story, for another time. Do Murray and his Dad survive? I.S. 303 becomes re-dedicated as the *Jayson Horst Williams School*. Many names were submitted, but they all for one reason or another were, dismissed. After all, Williams, who always played the martyr to the tee, may have had enough foresight to see how important sports in school would become. Poor Jayson would have never survived the Met's 7th game loss to the Oakland Athlete's in the '73 World serious. But his I.S. 303 will soon have a winning baseball team! Does his ghost haunt the visiting team's bullpen?

On the last day of school, June 28th, Acting-interm Principal Jack Russ, stands alone, looking out of his office window, watching his new 9th grade. They'll do O.K. They'll do even better than that. Everyone has a lot of work to do. There is a long road ahead.

XVIII

Aim: What Does Final Retribution From the Grave Mean?

An entire year passes. I graduate 9th grade with a respectable grade average. You wouldn't believe what happens in I.S. 303.

After graduating Saint John's University, Robert Tracz becomes an art teacher. He will find his art skills are not needed. Teacher's of Special Education and the elementary grades are in demand, but only in the worst schools situated in drug-infested, crime-filled neighborhoods. He experiences interview upon interview, till he "hits it off" with a pair of administrators named Mr. Kerlew and Mr. Faust. To Mr. Tracz, not entirely "wet behind the ears", these guys appear to be a very efficient team. Their candor is refreshing. They do not hide the fact that the task any teacher will face here would be a daunting one. Mr. Tracz has no experience with these kids; but like Russ's faith in Miss Hong, years ago, they see a real teacher in Mr. Tracz. They will give him all the help he needs. Before *Bob* signs on the dotted lines, he checks-out the bathrooms. Clean as a whistle. At the end of a very challenging year (his fellow teachers vote him "survivor of the year!") Mr. Tracz, has become Mr. T. *Their Mister T.*

Five years pass, and Mister T is promoted to the school science cluster teacher. Mrs. Baker, the Spanish teacher from Hell, has always been a frightful apparition, exiled to the deepest corner of consciousness. How could he have known that the memory of, “Our beloved Miss Wilson,” is very much a presence in P.S. 40. Photographic evidence confirms the fact that the two are same. Why did she decide to be a monster in Junior high? Did a bad marriage or the theft of her pocketbook cause the disintegration? Who knows?

Maybe Mr. Tracz has changed too. Now after 12 years at P.S. 40, Mr. T is becoming bored, even stale. A request to be transferred to a junior high to teach science is granted. Welcome to the Bronx, Mr. T.

These kids are not at all like the kids that went to I.S. 303 in 1972. They are just a little older than the elementary-age kids he left in South Jamaica, Queens. They enjoy all the freedoms that the reform-minded Jack Russ initiated 20-odd years in the past. Most are hostile, amoral, vicious, street-smart, bunch. If there is virgin amongst them, it's as rare as a student who hasn't at least tried crack, cocaine, or even H—heroin. Vincent Todler would feel quite at home. Mr. T quickly learns that he must be a Mr. Gerber or Mrs. Baker to survive. He's partially successful, as he beguiles, cajoles, as to the wonders of science. Budget cuts cause the laboratory program to be totally eradicated. Mr. T is a master “hands on” teacher”. Like Mrs. Wohl, his art teacher in I.S. 303, if a lab class gets rowdy, he makes them write the rules. Teaching science without the labs is like trying to teach art without paper and paint. When a chance to teach art materializes, he jumps at it.

P.S. 180 is a k-9 building—a very rare commodity that the Board would rather see retired simply because of administrative difficulties. The parents would never allow it to close. It's still a

“family” school, not just another crime-ridden junior high. The continuity the children crave is tangible, omnipresent. The faculty sees their kids enter P.S. 180 in kindergarten and they wave goodbye to them as graduating 9th graders.

The years speed by, almost like a runaway train. The aphorism “time flies when you're having fun” must be true. After 30-odd years in the classroom, Mr. T has discovered that showing little kids how to paint and draw is “where's it at”. To see the world with the eyes of a child is to be envied by every adult artist. They're naturally creative, these little painters, sculptors, draftsmen. All he has to do is point the way—they'll move freely along their destined chosen paths. How lucky can a man, a teacher get.

The End

While in his first year at Forest Hills High School, Robert opens a letter addressed to him, for a change-- not his Dad. It's composed of paper betraying a foreign origin—possibly from Shanghai, China. There's a hand-written 15-digit number written on a piece of rice paper. The words, “Swiss Account” appear. Dad takes it to his bank, *Manufacturers Hanover Trust*.

It appears that his son, Robert, now has a sizable Swiss Bank account. The donor is anonymous.

The same week, *The Long Island Press* tells of a murder, possibly drug related. Vincent Todler is found shot dead, a .32 caliber bullet placed neatly-- expertly-- between his eyes. The case is unsolved to this day, November 12, 2014.

Robert Stephen Tracz

Resume

Teacher of fine arts, art history, literature and poetry

EDUCATION: Saint John's University, New York, B.S. Art education: New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, M.A. History of Western Art. Lincoln Center Institute internship in dance

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE: Port Jefferson High School, art teacher, New York City

Board of Education, teacher in art, science, academic grades, Retired 2001

Putnam Science Discovery Center, Head instructor, Staff developer, Retired, 2001

Substitute teacher, various schools in New York, Connecticut, Retired 2011

Teacher of art history, Mount Saint Mary's College, Newburgh, New York, 1979

Teacher of Art Appreciation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1980

EXHIBITIONS: One-man-show, Port Jefferson Library, 1973

One-man-show, Library, Stony Brook, 2001, One-man-show Camel Coffee shop, Art Gallery

2005. Member, Lake Worth Art League, 2013, Palm Beach Watercolor Society

LITERARY ACHIEVEMENTS: Editor, *Crossup* Magazine, 1977-1978, Edison Prize for Poetry,

Bard College, 2009, Sherwood Anderson Short History Award, 1979

WORK EXPERIENCE OUTSIDE OF TEACHING: Classical music recording sales, 1972, carpentry, fishing guide.

Stage-hand, Metropolitan Opera, 1977

HOBBIES AND INTERESTS: Classical music, opera, model boats, tennis, golf, physical training