

## The Life and Times of Becky Kaplan

By Allison Fine  
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### Fire

*July 1953*

The fire hydrant stood four feet five inches high, painted in an ugly color of red, not bright or dull, but rather mean, the top, rounded, the bottom mired in a small pool of hardened cement decorated with the handprints of small children whom one might or might not remember. On the face of the hydrant projected a handle with the words “Pull” painted in white. It stood exactly at the corner intersection of Pershing Drive and Sunnyside Ave, so named because there were so few trees and therefore quite a lot of sunshine.

Becky had been spit out to play after bothering Alberta in the laundry room for nearly an hour. Her mother, Sylvia Kaplan, lay in bed upstairs, smoking in her bathrobe, upset and supposedly sick with anger.

“Go on out and find your little friend Tommy!” Alberta shouted after Becky and slammed the basement door, from out of which Becky saw the shadows and fumes the dryer produced. She had a bottle of lime Hi-Klass pop in one hand and her favorite doll in the other. She quickly dropped the doll upon seeing Tommy because he always made fun of her.

“Wanna come over and play?” he shouted.

“No. No, I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“The last time you asked me over to play Bobby trapped me in the garage and made me pull my pants down!”

“I won’t do that.”

“OK.”

Becky walked over the flowerbed trampling some tulips carelessly to get to Tommy’s back yard where huge sheets in lilac, yellow, green, pink and cream hung wishfully on the line. They did not wave and curl as they often did because the day was hot and listless as the children were, and everyone had kicked them out of the house and they were bored. Tommy’s mother worked out during the day for Tommy’s father.

“What does your father do, Tommy?”

“I don’t know. Where’s your sister?”

“She’s at camp.”

“Oh.”

The two children, aged six and seven, Becky the oldest, sat on Tommy’s driveway looking at cracks in the cement and watching ants go by carrying small pieces of grass.

“Where are the ants going?” Becky asked.

“I don’t know,” Tommy answered. “The anthill I guess.”

“Why don’t you come over and play on the Working Tree and I’ll play on the Singing Tree?”

“No,” said Tommy.

“Ok, so let’s play speeding motorist. I am speeding and you are a policeman and you chase me and you catch me and we fall in love and get married and have babies.”

“ I’ll get my bike.” The suggestion excited Tommy. He ran into his garage and pulled out his tricycle.

“My bike is broken. I’ll use my red wagon,” said Becky.

“Rebecca!” Alberta’s voice thundered out from the upstairs window. “What you doin?”

“I’m playing with Tommy Reynolds!” Becky shouted, pulling her red wagon from its entanglement with her sister’s big blue two-wheeler.

“You just stay in the drive, you hear?”

“We’re going to playing speeding motorist!”

“OK, you just keep close and don’t go out in the street or I’ll get after you.”

Alberta never got after her, but she always said it anyway.

Becky put her left knee into the belly of the wagon and used her right leg to propel herself down the drive. Incidentally, she ran over her doll but decided to deal with that later. That evening the smashed and dirty face of the doll would prove rather depressing, but now she had more important things to do.

Tommy waited at the end of his driveway for Becky to come speeding by. She whipped by faster than he thought she would, spilling the contents of her Hi-Klass pop all over the sidewalk.

“Tommy, Tommy, catch me—hurry up!”

Tommy pumped his little legs as fast as he could—so fast and hard his knees hit the handlebars of his tricycle but he didn’t pay attention to that. He caught Becky just as she pulled up in front of the Fire Hydrant.

“They don’t have a Fire Hydrant on Shubel Avenue like we do here.”

“I know that. Now, Misses Becky—“

“Call me Mrs. Kaplan.”

“But you’re not married. I have to marry you first.”

“Oh yeah. Ok, I am Miss Kaplan then.”

“Miss Kaplan, I see you been speeding here going 560 in a no speeding zone.”

“Wait—you can’t go 560 Tommy!”

“Ok, well, what can you go?”

“Never mind, let’s just get married and have babies.”

“Ok.” Tommy got off his tricycle and was about to pull Becky from her wagon when a blinding flash of insight hit her, running like electric waves all through her body. She had never been seized by such passion, except when she played the piano or the day of her Uncle’s funeral when she dropped the crystal water glasses on the kitchen floor.

“I’ve got an idea, Tommy.”

“What is it, Becky? You always got ideas.”

“Well, I know. So—here’s what we do. You lift me up.”

“What for?”

“Just do it Tommy—lift me up!”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t reach the fire hydrant if you don’t—that’s why!”

“Whaddaya have to do that for?”

“Cause—Tommy..” Becky put her hands firmly on her hips and put her exasperated mother face on.

“YOU must do it now, cause I said so.”

“Why are you always the boss?” Tommy moped. “What do I do?”

“Stick your hands around my legs and lift me—now come on, hurry up or I’ll tell my mother that you made me pull my pants down.”

Tommy grabbed Becky around the knees and lifted her.

“You’re heavy.”

“I am not. I weigh thirty or something..”

“I don’t care.”

The little white handle beckoned “pull me,” Becky placed two chubby hands around the handle and pulled with all her might.

“Let me go—let me go!” she shouted. The children stopped there ears just as the clanging bell rang out ricocheting all over Pershing Drive, down Sunnyside, up Lindbergh and over to Shubel Avenue. After the resounding bell came the huge, loud sirens of the Fire Trucks, coming up from the Fire Station only two blocks away across Mount Hope Avenue. The deafening sound erupted from the still summer air. Becky looked up Sunnyside Avenue and saw two huge trucks barreling down the street.

“Run Tommy run!” she screamed. Tommy jumped on his bike pumping his legs so fast he could hardly breath. Alberta came screaming out the back door, her big breasts bouncing like two huge white basketballs inside of her uniform.

“Rebecca— what you done did?”

Becky, who, in her haste had left her little red wagon at the fire hydrant, ran up the drive, out of breath.

“Nothing! Nothing! Alberta—Tommy Reynolds pulled the fire alarm!”

“What?”

Sylvia came out the back door in her bathrobe and gold slippers, cigarette in one hand and an old fashioned in the other.

“Alberta! What’s going on here!”

The fire trucks screeched around the corner of Sunnyside and Pershing, pulling up right in front of the Kaplan driveway on Lindbergh Drive.

“You better get your little hide upstairs Miss Rebecca Kaplan, you in big trouble!” Alberta shouted at Becky.

“I didn’t DO anything! Tommy pulled it!”

Four firemen including the Chief jumped out of the truck.

“Where’s the fire Mrs. Kaplan? Are the children out?”

Sylvia tried to calm the men down and even offered them some lemonade, but they declined.

Meanwhile, Becky got her little hide upstairs quick and slammed the bedroom door, deciding in a moment of inspiration to lock the handle, just in case. She heard the shouting downstairs and stomping coming up the stairs.

“Becky—you in big trouble, you hear?”

“No, I’m not—I didn’t do anything!”

“Open this door right now.” Becky could hear Alberta working the handle.

“You know, stupid,” her mother said with disdain, in her usual sarcastic tone of voice, “I can walk around the other side through your sister’s room; so just open the handle now.”

Becky opened the handle.

Her mother stood in front of her, cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. Alberta stood behind her mother, hanging the smashed and flaccid doll from one hand. Becky noticed how the sun played shadows and made a rainbow on the carpet from the window in the hallway. Where did that rainbow come from?

“Did you know, Little Miss Smarty Pants, that I had to pay the Fire Department Fifty dollars for your little prank? Just wait until your father gets home. You’re gonna get it!”

Sylvia went back to her bedroom and slammed the door.

“Alberta,” Sylvia whined from her bed,” Get me some aspirin!”

“Now look at the mess of things, Becky. You in big trouble.”

“Does this mean I can’t sing anymore with the Willing Workers Alberta? Huh?”

“I done baptized you, din I? Not what you getting all worked up about? These two events ain’t connected.”

“They is connected, Alberta.”

“No, they ain’t.”

“So—I can go to Church with you and sing with the Willing Workers?”

“Yes, when Mr. and Mrs. Kaplan go to Hawaii then I take you. Just don’t tell your mother.”

“Why not?”

“Cause your Jewish, that’s why.”

“I won’t tell. But you’ll take me, right?”

“Right.”

“But don’t take Wendy, ok?”

“Now, you are one ungenerous little soul, you know that?”

Alberta left, going back down the basement to finish the laundry. Becky looked at her doll with its smashed and dirty face and felt a wave of hatred well up inside of her. “I hate you!” she told the doll; then she hugged it. She and the doll lay on her bed watching the patterns of the bedspread. Sleep came—then a loud knock at her door and her father burst into the room.

“Daddy! Daddy! Don’t spank me, please!”

“You’re mother told me you were bad Becky. Is it true? Were you bad?”

“Yes—but please don’t spank me!”

“I told your mother you were getting a spanking. Now turn over.”

Becky turned over onto her belly, burying her face in the pillow. Oh, how remorse comes easily at the moment of punishment. Sobs and cries crammed up in her throat and her eyes stung with wet and pain.

“Daddy! Daddy!”

Her father clapped his hands very loudly.

“Becky this is a spanking for being bad.”

He clapped his hands again.

“And another one!”

Becky turned over and laughed.

“Shah,” her father said. “Your mother thinks you’re getting a spanking.”

“Oh.”

Frank Kaplan leaned down his large head with its shock of white hair and kissed her damp forehead, brushing the unruly blond curls from her eyes.

“Want to go for a ride?”

“Yes!”

“We’ll pick up grandma Kaplan and go see the project.”

Becky put her chubby fingers into the soft pads of her father’s thick hand, feeling his big ring with the Phi Sigma Delta insignia he always wore. Galumphing down the stairs after him two at a time she noticed the pen she had stuck there the other day in the newel post as she rounded the bottom stair.

“We’re going for a ride!” she shouted to the empty kitchen. Alberta had left several hours ago and Sylvia was asleep with a mask over her eyes on the couch in the den.

Frank, a short man with a barrel chest, wide forehead and the same small blue eyes he’d handed down to Becky, opened the garage and they got into his dark blue Cadillac. Becky always got to sit in the front seat when she went for rides with her father. Sylvia had the light blue Thunderbird and never let Becky sit in front. Backing out of the drive, her father looked at her.

“Now, Becky, it cost me \$50 for the Fire Department. How are you going to make that up?”

“I don’t know. Can I starch your shirts?”

Frank laughed. “If you sing the harmony perfectly that’ll do it.”

“OK, but let’s switch sometimes.”

“Fine, first verse you do melody and I do harmony, second verse we switch.”

“OK.”

As the car turned down Lindbergh Drive heading for Pennsylvania Ave. and the cross-town freeway, little Becky sang out the melody and Frank Kaplan added harmony in falsetto voice:

*You are my sunshine*

*My only sunshine*

*You make me happy*

*When skies are gray*

*You’ll never know dear*

*How much I love you*

*Please don’t take my sunshine away.*

Shadows turned darker as evening came stealing into the moment of the day, the two intersecting at the time we call dusk. Becky rolled her window down, singing to the trees and houses whizzing by the car as they headed out from the neighborhood.

## Alberta

*February 1962*

Alberta Coleman stood at the stove making sure the fried chicken grease didn't splatter up to her face. With a dishtowel in one hand and a long fork in the other, she kept turning the chicken over and over to brown it evenly on all sides. A large glass bowl on the counter held the perfectly boiled potatoes with a potato masher resting on the side of the bowl, waiting for her to mash them. The sun from outside the kitchen window to the left of her, lowering in the sky, came in through the window and reflected off the glass bowl sending a shiver of rainbow colors onto the beige Formica counter—red, purple, orange, yellow and green. Alberta darted a quick glance at the colors, remarking to herself that it was now past six and Becky better hurry her little self home quick for dinner. Mrs. Kaplan had left instructions about where she and Mr. Kaplan would be and how they were spending the evening at the club and would be driving to visit friends in Muskegon and wouldn't be back until Sunday. Dinner was nearly ready. A dish of nicely softened butter sat on the stove; there were rolls in the oven, with a pie baking on the top shelf. The black-eyed peas were nearly done, needed a bit more cooking to soften them up. She dropped a *glup* of butter onto the peas and sprinkled salt over the collards that were steaming all green and nice in the steamer. Over her white maid's uniform she wore Mrs. Kaplan's apron with *balabusta* written in red cursive letters across the front. Bennie Coleman was in the Kaplan den watching the last of a summer baseball game between the Detroit Tigers and the Baltimore Orioles. The bases were loaded and Hank Aguirre, a big lug of a guy at 6'4" was up to bat.

Becky walked into the kitchen from the back door just as Alberta turned the burner down on the chicken.

Hey honey chile, gimme some sugar.

Becky kissed Alberta. Her deep, mahogany skin felt soft and sweet to the touch. Becky noticed how smooth her face was—she had no wrinkles and her black hair was done all in soft curls about her face.

You're wearing mom's apron.

Your mama done gone with Mr. Kaplan to the club, sweet, and they goin' to Muskegon to visit the Grossman's and play golf for the weekend.

Becky inwardly cheered.

Did they take both cars?

No, they took Mr. Kaplan's Lincoln. You ain't thinkin' of drivin' anywheres are you, cause Mrs. Kaplan left me instructions—no driving the car.

Oh, jeez, Alberta—I just want to meet my friends over at Tom's.

Maybe Bennie give you a ride. Go in the den and give him a kiss.

Becky loped off to the den. Bennie was leaning forward on the couch, the remote to the television in one hand, a white mesh baseball cap on his head. Bennie was a tall long drink of water, 6'2", lean and agile even at the age of sixty-five, his hair still black, short cropped close to the head and glistening with hair cream. He talked in a long, slow Georgian drawl, making his words and sentences like meditative, musical links. Two words could be a paragraph and more than a sentence could take five minutes.

Well, hi my sweet pea, and how ya doin? He looked over at Becky. My, don't you look mighty pretty.

Becky sat next to Bennie on the couch, draping her long, thin white arms about his neck and gave him a juicy, affectionate hug and kiss.

Now, he drew out the ‘now’ long and deep, Alberta in the kitchen makin your fav’rit meal.

Oh, don’t I know it!

We stayin’ here foh the weekend, pie.

Yeah, Alberta told me.

She kissed him again and went back to the kitchen.

Alberta turned and smiled at Becky. She looked more grown up this year. The face had changed—taken on a little more woman and less of the little girl. Her strong, thin body was coming into a nice shape. Her funny old ways were more hidden now—something else was peeking through. Alberta saw a bit of Sylvia Kaplan in her daughter, with something of the wildness of her father too.

You want to go fresh up before dinner?

Yeah—I think I’ll go take a bubble bath in mother’s bathtub.

You ain’t got time for bubble bath, Becky—dinner most ready now.

Ok, how about a shower?

Make it quick.

Becky ran off upstairs.

Alberta took the chicken out of the frying grease placing all the pieces on a large platter sitting on the counter and turned off the stove. Everything was ready. She scooped the peas into another glass bowl, whipped the potatoes until they were frothy and creamy

white, mixing in the milk and the butter and some salt, drained the collard greens and put them in another bowl.

Dinner done near ready, Bennie. She turned off the oven and left the pie in there to cool a bit. She pulled the rolls out of the oven and arranged them on another platter.

Aw right—jes lemme watch this one last play.

You gwan call Becky up now.

Uh-huh. He did not move. The game was almost over and he knew the Tigers would lose anyway. He switched off the television and sat himself down in Frank's chair at the breakfast table. Alberta went back and forth from the kitchen to the breakfast room putting all the food in the center, arranged just so. She brought glasses of ice and a pitcher of lemonade and another pitcher of water.

You gwan call Becky?

I thought you did.

Aw...

Alberta went to the bottom of the stairs.

Becky! You come on now for dinner!

Coming!

Becky came down the stairs in white short-shorts and a tight pink laced top, her dark, burnished hair glowing with a deep blood red hue, brushed off her face into a loose ponytail. Silver and garnet earrings reflected the light and set off her golden skin.

She followed Alberta to the table.

Now you take all you can eat. You know Alberta make your fave-rit.

Thank you Alberta.

Yo welcome, Bennie said.

Mm-mm, Alberta mumbled as she picked some skin off a leg. Hep yo'selfs.

For some moments nobody talked while they ate and passed the platters around.

Becky took a huge lump of mashed potatoes and glumped them onto her plate.

You gwan eat all that? Bennie asked.

Oh yes I am.

Tell me about the South, Becky said suddenly, as she forked the heavenly mashed potatoes into her collard greens and mixed them all up. Mother never makes mashed potatoes like this.

I learn that from my mama and her mamma my grandmammy.

Cooking?

All of it, Bennie said.

Becky wanted the stories. She had asked the same questions over and over of Bennie and Alberta all through the years since she was three, but every time the stories changed a little, some things got embellished, some things she never heard again, but always new things popped up, and the older she got the more they told about this and that in the South. The stories got larger as she got older. Soon she would be going away and take the stories with her.

How many children in your family?

I had fifteen brothers and sisters.

Oh my god. How could anybody have that many children?

Some of them chillen died.

How?

Two babies was stillborn and one baby died of rheumatic fever and my brother—he died.

Oh yes, Bennie said.

How many children in your family Bennie?

We had seventeen.

What did you all do?

Alberta laughed.

Oh my chile—we had fun. We had great big meals, cause we all worked the farm, and had picking and hoeing and all sorts of work, but then we all sits down and eats a big meal together. And me and my sisters went to dances and danced and had fun. We went to Church and sang.

You sang.

Alberta sing beautiful, Bennie smiled. Don't she?

Oh yeah—she taught me the gospels, Becky said.

I taught you *All God's Chillen Got Wings*. She can play all that on the piano, Alberta said to Bennie with pride.

Oh, yes, Bennie said, our little miss can play.

So, what was it like in the South?

Ah...Bennie eating slow, picking up a chicken bone, drawled out his ideas like a long pull of taffy on a hot day. Colored peoples is different lives in the South, honey.

How different?

We done worked for other peoples a lot, some white folk, natch-ally, but theys had a big old cotton farm and I done picked cotton since I was knee high.

You picked cotton? Did people still do that when you were little?

Alberta laughed. Oh yes, the South is cotton.

Didn't you go to school?

Yes'm, we alls went to school, but I quit in third grade cause I had to work and help the others coming after.

I made it up to seventh grade, Alberta said, cause I was thinking I would be a nurse. But then I met Bennie and we come here up North.

Do you like it here up North? Becky asked. Please pass the greens.

Alberta passed the greens.

Oh, folks treat us right nice up here. You know Bennie worked the floor at Motor Wheel till his hearing went bad. He was a presser. Then he was a driver for the McLean's and they gives him the Cadillac. I was cleaning for Mrs. McLean until I came here to clean for your mama and take care of you all.

I know.

Bennie's pristine green Cadillac, 1959, with leather upholstery, in perfect condition. He took complete care of that car from inside out. It looked brand new and the engine purred like a kitten.

She done me right.

Who? Becky asked.

That old Cadillac. She done me right. Bennie looked over at Becky.

Alberta laughed.

Oh, I say, Alberta exclaimed.

What happened to your brother? The one that died?

Thas story we got to tell you. Colored folks have been had some bad times. You know that.

Yes, I know that. They have bad times up here too.

Nothun like down there. Mmm-mm.

You want some more chicken, honey? Alberta asked her.

Oh, I am so full.

You best save room for the pie, Bennie told her. Alberta, you done make the pie?

Uh-huh.

Alberta went into the kitchen and came back with the apple pie.

I got the whip cream your mama had in the freezer.

She cut three slices and placed them on the dessert plates she'd brought from the kitchen, poured out some more lemonade in everybody's glasses and looked over at Bennie.

You got it all now?

Yes'm. Sit down and eat yo pie.

Alberta sat. Becky dug into the pie. The crust was flaky and perfect, the apples oozed all over her plate, the tart and tangy sweetness of the taste mingling in her mouth.

My brother done got hisself in trouble.

He went to jail?

No, honey—he weren't but thirteen.

Oh.

Some white boys up the road—they's Ku Klux Klan, Bennie said.

I know about that.

They's called us the niggers down the way. You know. They way they do down south. They weren't Klan, Bennie. Maybe their daddy's were—but these was young kids, maybe sixteen, seventeen.

Oh they's was oldern' that, Bennie said, finishing off his pie. Some of them's was nigh onto twenty.

You tellin' this story? Alberta spooned some more whipped cream onto her pie.

We worked their patch offed and on, you know. Offed and on and they's bigger boys, much bigger than Willie reckon. But we has our own piece too, a little piece, but biggern' theirs.

You had land.

Oh yes. We growed everything. My pappy growed all the food we ate.

Colored boys got to watch what they says, Bennie said, drawing out the a.

Oh, Willie done nothing, he weren't but thirteen! Bennie, you ain't been there!

Ah.. he said. You tell me Alberta. He hummed a low down laugh to himself.

Willie is your son.

Yes'm but Willie done be her brother too, way back.

Oh. So you named Willie after your brother.

There was silence.

We ought not be telling this story now, Alberta.

Why not? She fit to hear it.

Yo folks won't like it.

I won't tell them, I promise. I don't give a damn what they think anyway.

Don't you swear at our table! Bennie said, in something like an affectation of sternness.

Becky looked down at her plate.

Sorry.

Oh he don' mean it. Give'im some sugar.

Becky leaned over the table and kissed Bennie.

I know you don mean no harm—you jes got to be taught.

I understand, Becky said, a sudden sense of shame.

Tell me about Willie.

I do. But I gots to clear these plates, Alberta said.

I'll do it. Becky jumped up and started clearing.

Yo right good girl, Bennie said as Becky cleared the table, bringing the sponge from the kitchen and wiping things down.

Alberta went into the kitchen and started clearing up.

I gots to put these things into the dishwasher.

I'll do it, Becky told her.

No, yous sits down with Bennie.

Becky obeyed while Alberta washed up.

So what happened to Willie? Becky asked Bennie.

I dunno. Now you gwan have to ask Alberta that. It her story.

Alberta came back, a dishtowel around her waist, hooked around the apron tie and hanging down to her knees.

You want more, honey?

No, I's fine, Alberta. You done tell her the story.

Wille were a boy of thirteen, like I said. A good boy but sometimes goin off, you know.

Going off?

Getting into trouble—this'n'that, what boys do. Stealing a chicken or a bunch of tomatoes, jes stuff kids do. We wus country folk all around; always goin' in and out of each other's patches. Nothing serious. But these white boys has it in for Willie cause he was a bright boy and we wus thinkin' he might right go to college. He was readin' and writin' early—we all taught him.

Was he youngest?

Oh no, they was five after him, but Willie was the smartest. So one days Willie gets into something—I don know what—

He steal something from the wrong patch, Bennie added.

Somethin'. Don' know what. And they'd get after him. He run back and says to us that they's after him.

The white boys?

Yes, some white boys up the road. But we don't pay no mind—it goes on all the time and we wus fixin' to go to a dance and Willie was going with us for the first time. He had a little girl he liked.

At thirteen?

My mama got married at fourteen. Me and Bennie done got together when we was fifteen.

Things start early in the South, Becky said.

Oh yes, but then we was growed up early, Bennie said.

So we all goes to the dance and then we all walk home. It was a moon night out, big moon, golden up in the sky, real big.

Oh, I can picture that moon.

Willie stayed with his girl, I think—they was doing a moon of their own, I reckon! But we's all get home and clean up for mama, get all the things out for the next morning and go to bed. We all's slept in one big room with a great big bed here and a big bed there. It was hot them nights so we sleep without the covers, just in our underwear. Next morning Willie don't come down to breakfast and nobody know where he is.

Mmm-mm, Bennie said, the low tones of his voice sending an arc of deep vibration into Becky's stomach.

I goes out to look for Willy, Alberta said and she wiped her eyes.

Oh, Alberta—Becky started.

No, you gwan Alberta.

Alberta got up for some Kleenex on the sideboard and dabbed her eyes with it.

My eyes is bad. I got the glaucoma you know.

I know.

You member when you threaded that needle for me? You was only three! I'll do it you tells me and you did!

I remember.

Alberta don' want to tell this story.

Oh please finish it, Alberta.

You ain't gwan a like it, Bennie said.

No, but—

Aw right, Alberta said, I's fine. We go on out the road past our house by some boy's patch somewhere's down the road, and I seen a shadow before I seen the thing. A shadow of a body on the ground from up high in a tree. We crep' on up closer and I member clearly my sister Erline let out a scream like to chill you to the grave—when she done seed who it was, and we all did. Her screaming were like some kind of screeching animal from somewhere's else. I member telling her to stop so's we could get a good look and cuts him down. Willie done been hanged in the tree. By these boys. They done hanged him. We knowed they done it but nobody could do a thing about it.

You couldn't get a lawyer or call the police or something?

Bennie laughed, like a horn wailing out of a still night. Alberta was silent.

No, honey, we couldn't do that. We cuts him down and takes him home to our mama. His body all scraped and dirty. We cleaned him up. Our mama screamed and wailed all over the place. My daddy's never says a word but I knowed he was angry because he just didn't talk at all. And then we take Willy up to the Baptist church and have his funeral and bury him. He buried there—at Union Baptist.

Do you see his grave?

Every so's often.

I can't believe people could do things like this! Becky was enraged.

Peoples do's it, Bennie said. They do's it.

So we comes up North. Colored peoples do better up here.

They still have a long way to go, Becky said, angry and hurt and filled with an awful sense of doom. We better change it.

We's changin' it. Reverend King is changing it.

Yes, Alberta said, Bless his soul.

Becky went over and kissed Alberta.

No you don' worry yourself 'bout this baby, this was a long time ago. Many years we talkin' maybe forty, fifty years back.

It don' matter. When you tell it like it was today, Bennie added.

Yes, Becky said. It is today.

Maybe not. Colored folks is getting mighty proud these days.

They ought to.

Oh, no, Bennie's voiced rocked Becky's body down to her bowels, no sense in getting too uppity.

We gots to pray, Alberta said softly.

What do we pray?

We pray Jesus help us, baby, give us the love and strength to carry on. You know—that song I been singing when you was little? *You can be saved, O yes, you can be saved--*

Alberta, she done be raised Jewish, Bennie interrupted.

Oh let her sing. I love it.

The only thing keeps me going is I knows God loves me and he loves us all.

Maybe Willie is up in heaven and he knows that, Alberta.

Willie with Jesus, Alberta said. Now what you gwan do tonight?

I'm not sure. Maybe somebody will call and I'll go to this party.

You best go on to a party when you's young, Bennie said.

Yes, I best do, Becky told him. She looked out the window and saw the dark blue hues of twilight meet the gold tones of the last of the day.

I'm going to put on some makeup, she announced.

You gwan do that and we's watch some TV.

Becky left Alberta and Ben sitting at the table over the remains of lemonade and apple pie. Alberto turned her face to Bennie and he took her hand in his two large ones. The front-side of his hands were deep, deep mahogany but the palms were like a light, sweet cocoa brown.

Now why you gwan tell her that story?

She most needs to hear it.

Bennie shook his head. I don' know, Alberta. Most ways this kind of thing cause trouble.

This girl has always been trouble—right from the start! Jes let her make trouble the right way.

These white folks train their chillen up to be like them.

Not Becky. She don't be like nobody.

Alberta looked at Bennie, this man she had loved for nigh on fifty years now, since she was a girl of fifteen. His face had softened up a bit, the strong lines of the jaw and chin were a moving a bit south, but it was still a very handsome man she had. Tall, strong, with such a deep, sweet heart. Those moments in bed, she could remember—how he loved her with his strength and his gentle ways, how he held her deep and tight. They been together all their lives, working in service and raising up Willie. She done right by Willie, she done right by Bennie too. When he most had to leave the factory she did her

part and took those jobs as a maid and a cook. She would most like to have more time in the little garden of theirs in the house he bought her on the west side, but she kept to her bargain and took care of her man. And Bennie, he weren't no kind of man to jes sit round the house and babble—he was up early mornings polishing his car and chauffeuring and driving for the peoples—he drove for Mr. McLean for fifteen years.

And now--he sixty-five—he most ready to relax after all his work. Jesus done right by me, Alberta thought, he give me this beautiful man all my life.

When she thought of Mrs. Kaplan and all the unhappiness and troubles in her marriage—Sylvia and Alberta were most like friends, almost, even though there was that distance, that barrier, but Becky—she was her baby. She had Becky from three on and she raised up that girl and taught her the gospel songs and even took her to Church when the folks was away. Beautiful Becky.

I love her like my own, Alberta spoke aloud.

Yeah, she done turn out a mighty pretty young woman.

She got some ways, though, don't she? Alberta laughed.

Yess..Bennie drew out the yes for a long time. She got some ways.

That little thing pulled the fire hydrant when she wuz three!

They both laughed.

Ooo-wee! Alberta exclaimed, Miz Kaplan fit to be tied!

Bennie chuckled.

She warn't but a baby.

Alberta smiled and looked out the window at the sun making a platter of gold on the lawn sending fingers of light and shadow, a burnished red color snaking across the grass.

You gimme my old kiss and I go watch de television, Bennie said, catching Alberta's eye. She kissed him lightly on the cheek, brushing her hand across the back of his head.

I gots to finish and clean up the kitchen and do my laundry. Calls me when Becky getting ready to go out.

I will.

Bennie got up from the table, while Alberta took herself back into the kitchen. Standing at the kitchen window by the stove her thoughts were sliding visual memory, moments falling open like a rain of light and shadow and fastening into the room of her mind with a sigh.

She done been blessed, she reckoned that. Like a sea, like a laugh, like waves, like a silence run underground, and even the grief of Willy could follow itself into the seamless borders of all that memory.

## Something Else

**May, 1965:**

Fifteen gave Becky a long and slender body, carried with entitlement, the high and mighty hauteur of a dancer, certainly the arrogance of one, white arms with a thinness almost tragic, legs, shapely, stretching out forever, high breasts, rounded, very long dishwater colored hair wildly curling all down her back, arched brows above small blue eyes missing nothing, registering it all, the soft, rounded planes of her face ending at a pointed chin, the curve of the mouth looking like someone who wants to devour everything in the world and disdain it at the same time, hugged her knees to her chest as she sat at the window seat of the Public library on Capitol Avenue.

Her erstwhile friends, The Canto Literary Club, sat behind her pretending to read Hemingway, (one girl rebelled and read *Women in Love* instead) but really looking out the window with her, waiting for the something they had all been promised would come. That something came sooner than they thought, roaring up to the front of the building making such a racket that the heads of the homeless, who hid there during the day, turned, and the girls rushed to the window, putting their hands on the glass, breathing on it and frosting it up with their condensed breath.

-Becky, don't run right out there, Valerie, a Latvian girl with hips the size of Rhode Island, cautioned her.

-Oh, forget it," Caroline, said, the only real blond in the group, she's about to get de-flowered. Let her run.

-I am not, Becky announced, rising from her perch on the window seat, stretching her long frame. The girls watched the impossibly beautiful body of Becky with its waist

tapered to the smallest rounding of hip, and no fat from the hip to the thigh, wishing they could for one second, (or more) be inside of Becky's body. She wore pink pedal pushers, tight on her calves, and a white halter-top with a strapless bra.

-Becky, I just wish I could go along as a fly on the wall or something, Ellen said. Ellen with the nasty older brother Schram who molested her when she was six and seven and eight, who would leave school in her junior year, pregnant and ruined.

-Ellen, they don't have walls outside.

-OK, but don't run. Stroll—amble—whatever. Make it look as if—

-As if you are a Hemingway, heroine, which you are, said Anna Marie, the quiet one with darkened eyes, looking as if she haunted the back stacks of a library night and day and never slept without a book in her hand, the one who went to Hebrew School two nights a week to study for her Bat Mitzvah even though she wasn't Jewish, the one whose mother was a painter on welfare and who didn't know who her father was, the one who would one day become an Insurance Claims adjuster making upwards of \$150,000 a year, the one whose mother would die and leave her a hundred oil paintings that she sold for \$50 to an art dealer.

Becky smiled, thinking how glorious it was to be fifteen and full of the freshness that fifteen offered. No encumbrances, (that she could think of) except homework, all the lovely moments of life ahead of her, all the literature in the world to read, and digest and copulate with in her strange nights, and emulate, and all the great works she herself would write.

-Think of the vast sexual experiences she will have in Europe with exotic men who complain of the draft in winter, Anna Marie said, a certain sad wistfulness to her voice.

-Oh, for Christ's sake, Morgan butt in. Morgan, the one group cynic, the one who had a job, the one whose father had left when she was seven, the one whose mother dated men of different races and nationalities, the one who was neither fat nor thin, but confident that whatever she lacked she'd make enough money to forget about. Her brown eyes, large but looking small, her shoulder length bob with the deep wave over her left eye, the hands looking as if they were forever searching for the cigarette she'd just put out—she always stood as the voice of reason. Idealism—it is high time we get the collective focused on reality, she would say, in her caustic, deep-throated way.

-I'm going, Becky announced to the girls, who took a collective deep breath and stood glued to the window.

The man on the bike revved the motor, gunning it with the kind of impatience only young girls cannot resist.

-We'll watch you go, Ellen said with the same reverence she used to recite Hail Mary's at St. Mary's on Lenawee. She often said her prayers in French. She thought it gave her a pathetic quality—it helped her identify with Jean d'Arc.

*O mon dieu, Je crois que ton divin Fils s'est fait homme, qu'il est mort pour nos péchés et qu'il reviendra juger les vivants et les morts. Je le crois, ainsi que toutes les vérités sacrées que nous enseigne la sainte Église catholique, parce que c'est toi qui les as créé, et que tu ne peux ni tromper ni être trompé.*

No one could understand a word of it.

Becky glided out of the main room of the library to the heavy doors at the front, pushing through the turnstile. She'd left her notebooks with the girls and all she had was

her little pink wallet that she'd stuck into the back pocket of her pedal pushers. As soon as the doors shut behind her she ran—down the steps and right up to the curb. A smile would be nice, she thought, a good smile. She thought of how Valerie had reacted when Hank first showed up for Becky—

-He looks like James Dean, Valerie had told her.

-More like Brando on acid, Morgan said.

-You don't even know what Acid is, Anna Marie told her.

-Oh yes I do, Morgan smiled her knowing smile.

Hank sat on the bike; the word *stoic* comes to mind.

-A person who can endure pain or hardship without complaining or showing their feelings, Becky thought. Oh Hank. You are so stoic. Then she coughed from the fumes rising from his exhaust. The Indian on the front of the bike was lit up. She put her right hand on the mouth of the Indian, as if to shut it up.

-Get on, Hank barked, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He was a man, all of twenty-eight years old, wise in the ways of death and hatred, veteran of two years in the jungles fighting for something he thought he knew, but ending up with resentful pain, a closed head injury he recovered from, or not, a lot of awful moments, some great times with the guys getting stoned and dreaming of Janis Joplin, dreaming of taking a piece of her heart out, dreaming of rich girls in white halter tops. He brought back visions--visions of buddies mangled up by sniper fire and land mines and visions of buddies losing their legs and arms and stomachs and intestines winding out of their skin like bloody red pig entrails, wrapped in gauze, in sheets, in body bags, the noise of

helicopters and radios and men screaming out the names of their mothers, their sisters, their friends, their lovers, their children.

His hair, dark and curly, wild enough but combed straight back, not a hippy this man, but a little too mad for that, a little too streetwise for that, a little too smart for that—green eyes that knew how to make a girl feel naked, make her tremble and get all prickly inside, eyes that knew what women wanted and how to give it, eyes that missed little but gave nothing. Try me, said his eyes, pushing into the secret places you tried to hide from him, pushing anyway. Enticing eyes, a lean, muscular body, built for survival on a bike, in the jungle, on the pavement, in the streets, a feminine man, scared of the woman inside, scared that the man was not enough of a man, scared that while he lived a bunch of guys he loved died, scared that his alcoholic mother would grab him into her secret place and never let him go, scared that his dead father would come alive again and beat the shit out of him, scared that maybe he wasn't really a man at all.

The day secreted the heavy odor of flowers—crocuses, lilacs, roses, lilies. Becky got onto the back of the bike as Hank shifted into gear. He wore penny loafers clean and polished, faded jeans with a crease in them as if he'd ironed them (he did). They took off in a cloud of smoke, exhaust and fume. Becky tried to look back at the library window to see the girls, but they went too fast, her hair whipping cuts onto her face, the wind forcing her to lean into his back, her thin arms hugging tight around his waist. She never knew where they were going.

All the trees around sprouted tiny, pale green buds, the humid air seeped into lungs and faces and bodies making them sweat. Becky tried to think of literature, to think of spices of the old world, to think of something, but the speed of the bike and the

whirling world screaming past them as she held onto to Hank, going fifty, maybe sixty miles an hour, took the thoughts right out of her mind and tossed them negligently into the current of air. They sped through downtown past strip malls and rundown houses and empty storefronts and then the terrain changed to farmland and trees and the outer edges of the campus. Hank leaned the bike dangerously close to the ground bumping onto a dirt road down a steep embankment and halted, his right foot dragging on the grass as he shifted down, stopping at a tree nestled by the Red River. He got off the bike leaving Becky to sit alone on the back, catching what little breath was left, trying to formulate a sentence that would make her sound witty and urbane.

-God it's hot, she said, and got off the bike, her legs feeling weak, her thighs trembling with exhaust, feeling as if she were still on the bike, her heart bumping inside of her, what was this feeling? Maybe something was out of control, but she couldn't go there just yet. What a day, she thought.

Hank lit a cigarette from the pack of Camels tucked into the sleeve of his white T-shirt.

-Your folks know what you're doing?

-What do you think?

He rolled the pack of cigarettes back into the sleeve while she watched his chest ripple and relax, smoke twisting into the dead air.

-There must be a million mosquitoes.

-Yeah, Hank said, slapping a mosquito into death. A little speck of blood appeared on his tanned arm, brushed with a gloss of golden hair.

-Come on and sit down.

He walked over closer to the river and sat on a grassy place underneath a Maple tree.

-I've been reading Henry Miller, she told him.

-So what?

She sat next to him, mingling her smell with the faint musk smell coming from his arms. Looking out over the river she saw the lily pads, heard frogs, saw a mother duck and two ducklings swim by as if they were doing Giselle. The water smelled grassy, seedy—like old water in a green bottle sitting in the garage.

-I don't know what you want from me, he said, his hand on her thigh.

-I don't know what you mean.

-Oh, don't be so fucking obtuse Becky.

Obtuse, what does that mean? God, obtuse—now let's see—strange, different, unusual? She almost wished she had her dictionary there, so she could look it up and throw something back at him.

Hank put his arm behind her and pulled her into his body—she sucked in the warmth from his shirt and skin, felt the hot breath on her face. He leaned in and kissed her, his mouth all warm and soft, the tongue tasting of coke and salt and something bitter she didn't recognize. After the kiss he leaned back on the tree looking at her in the way that made her feel totally weak and exposed and excited.

Oh God, look at me this way forever, she thought.

-I bet you haven't read Kerouac yet, have you?

-Yes I have.

-Remember Sally with the skinny, skinny body and the beautiful box? He leaned forward toward her, his face an inch from hers. -You got a beautiful box?

-Of course I do, she said, hoping a box was something that could be beautiful.

He jumped up and went over to the bike, pulling a small book from the dirty pouch on the side, along with a bottle of coke.

-Want some?

-Sure.

-Come and get it.

She got up like some kind of obedient dog, and went over to him standing next to his bike. Reaching her hand out, he snatched it away and laughed.

-Want it?

-Yes.

-Come and get it.

He held the bottle behind his back.

-Give it to me, she said.

-Here, baby.

She grabbed the bottle from his hands and took a long, slow drink, the warm liquid sweet burning down her throat with an acid aftertaste.

He flipped through some pages of the book, his smudged hands with the long fingers, his sorry bent head almost looking vulnerable, finding a page turned down at the corner.

-All that old road of the past unreeling dizzily as if the cup of life had been overturned and everything gone mad. My eyes ached in a nightmare day.

He threw the book onto the seat of the bike, stood leaning against the bike, breathing heavily, almost heaving; lost in some world she could only guess at. The world of his past, the world of his dreams, the world of his moody, angry self, the world of being twenty-eight with no money and a rich girl beside him who wasn't older than his sister, the world of this river, nothing like the Mekong River, that smelled of rotting, burning flesh and screaming miserable people, the world of the moment, the present, the past, the forever—the world he had no hope about ever and would never have again. She longed to know his world.

-Oh come and sit down Becky.

-I just want to know—

-Know what?

-What you're—what you're thinking about.

-I'm not thinking about anything. Sometimes there's just nothing. It's just one long, fucking winding road of nothing.

-I never think nothing.

-Sometimes nothing is better than something.

He pulled her along by the river and they sat down, Hank leaning against the tree with Becky encased in his arms sitting between his legs. He held her tight, and she let her head rest on his chest, feeling his heart, his breathing, his right hand caressing her left arm up and down.

-I think about the war and what's going to happen.

-Oh do you, now? You think about the war? His voice was laced with sarcasm.

-I don't know why you have to be so—so hidden about it. Can't you talk about it?

-I don't even talk about it with my best friend.

-Aren't I your best friend?

She turned in his lap, lifting her hand to touch his head; that beautiful glorious head she wanted to blast inside of, irritate; nest in and dwell in forever at least for the rest of the day. His fine, dark curly hair made her ache. She put both her hands on his head and mussed up his hair, let her fingers move all over, while he allowed it, enjoyed it, leaned into it.

-Your hair smells.

-Brille Cream.

-You still use that?

-Yeah. I ain't no hippy, girl.

-I like hippies.

-Yeah, why? They're bunch of lazy Asses who don't know shit.

-They're not all lazy.

-You're not a hippy, Becky.

-I would be if my parents would let me.

He laughed.

-God you're just so—

-So what?

-So stupid.

-Maybe.

She smiled. She loved it when he chided her—it made her feel like an adored and special little girl. Becky grabbed his head with both hands and forced him to look her in

the eyes—those green eyes—transparent—searching—pleading—hunting something from her. She sought to give it to him, whatever it was—that something that would make him feel proud. She could crawl inside of him if she'd had a mind to. If he'd let her.

-You don't know what you're getting into.

-I don't care.

-You will.

He reached a hand underneath her halter to touch her belly—the energy of his hand strong, hot, something electric snaking into her to a place she hadn't known about—that place deep inside her belly where no dreams could go. He kissed her again, this time he let his tongue move all inside of her mouth, soft, warm, reaching, teasing from her throat a little noise of desire. He stopped kissing her and leaned back against the tree.

-I just got out of the psychiatric ward at St. Lawrence. He lit another cigarette.

Want one?

She took it, even though she didn't smoke.

-Never mind, don't want to start that, now, he said, grabbing the cigarette out of her hand.

-Hey!

-Forget it, Becky.

-What were you doing there?

-What difference does it make? He threw his butt into the bushes and tucked her unlit cigarette behind his ear. She wasn't sure if he meant the cigarette or the hospital.

-The hospital, I mean.

-I know what you mean.

-Well, it doesn't matter to me. I mean—I know you're not crazy or something.

You're not crazy are you?

Hank contorted his face into a distorted ugly mask.

-Ha-ha. I'm crazy as a loony tunes; crazy as a ghost on Saturday night, crazy as the red sky in October. That's the crazy I am.

Becky began to wonder if he really were crazy.

-Oh, stop it. You're not scaring me.

-Ha ha.

-Well, I don't care.

-Care about what? His tone and mood changed, minute to minute, every moment another cloud or the sun or the rain or the heat or the snow. She never knew what weather would explode from his mind.

-The mental institution. Who cares?

-It wasn't a mental institution—it was a psychiatric ward. He smiled. You don't even know the difference.

-I know the difference.

-What's the difference, Becky?

She wondered whether 'what's the difference' meant between mental institutions and psychiatric wards or between life and death.

-People die; Becky, and you don't even love me.

-I do love you.

-Love is impossible.

-No it's not.

-I say it is.

He looked at her, contempt curling his mouth.

-I tried to commit suicide, now what do you think about that?

She thought about it as she thought about the trees, the sound of the river, the silence between them, the soft sound of leaves rustling, the heat of the late spring, all that green and gold and dawn and the time of day and when it would be sunset. When it would be a golden sky just reaching to the night. She thought about the dark and cooler air as the night would come, she thought about Hank alone in that night, she thought about how she could be with him when he was not with himself.

She grabbed him without thinking, her hands pulling his head down into her lap so she could hold his body inside of her arms, encircle his face with her hands, kiss his sweet eyebrows and feel the planes of his face and trace the profile of his nose and chin with her finger. The sensitive tips of her fingers felt his cheeks; the stubble of beard, lapping sounds from the river poised a counterpoint to their movement. Out in the distance of the woods an owl caressed the air; she heard a train whistle from the tracks down on Pennsylvania Avenue.

-You couldn't possibly understand a man with a cynical nature.

-My best friend is a cynic, Hank.

-That's her. Not you.

-No, I'm not a cynic, I'm a—

-Spoiled rich Jewish girl.

-I'm not that spoiled.

-Oh ho! He laughed deep in his stomach. She could feel the ripples of his laugh move into her body.

-Well, my parents love me.

-Oh they do, do they? That's just blood money.

She had no idea what blood money meant but she refused to ask him.

-You read a lot, but you don't know anything, he told her.

-I know what I know.

-And I like what I like!

He got up from her lap and stretched his body out so she could see the whole length of it and want it, crave it, desire it, need it, debase herself for it. She could touch the whole of it all, including the debasement. She knew the will to go to whatever place she had to go to get what she wanted from this form standing in front of her.

-I love music, he said, turning quickly back to Becky still sitting on the ground.

The space between the notes is more important than the notes themselves.

-What a beautiful idea.

-Yeah.

He laughed, knowing that she had no idea it was Miles Davis's idea, not his own. He could quote anything he wanted, claim it, own it, name it and she wouldn't know the difference. The power of it all captivated and bored him—he needed a woman who knew more than he did, but he craved a girl who knew nothing.

-I love music. I play music, Hank.

- 'I dream of women, women in slips and slipshod garments. At one point that awful haughty bitch who was my wife-' he stopped. -Know that?

- You were married?
- God, Jesus, Becky. Desolation Angel.
- Desolation Angel...
- That's the name of his book. You said you read Kerouac.
- I did--I do. I—
- Oh stop it, Becky. Stop lying and trying to impress me. It's boring as hell.

She looked down at the ground watching some busy ants carrying pieces of earth too big for them. He stood over her, his penny loafers eye level to her gaze.

-I don't mean to hurt you. I can really be mean sometimes.

-Well, why?

-Because I love you. I'm always mean to people I love.

-I love you too.

-No you don't. Anyway, I told you love was impossible.

-But you just said you loved me.

-Maybe I lied. Maybe I'm fooling myself.

The timber of his voice carried something that shot through her like jagged glass cutting her skin making her bleed. He leaned down to lift her chin up with his hand. Her heart felt tight, she thought she might cry, but she wouldn't allow it. The touch of his hand, the catch in his voice got her started. The way the sound brought excitement from his throat right into the middle of her body—the curls of his dark hair around his ears and down the back of his tanned neck, the way the curls felt brushing her cheek when he leaned down to kiss her again.

-Becky, you're ready for this.

Her throat was so tight she couldn't talk.

I don't want to be alone, Hank, she thought, I want you to make me understand how life is, how I am, how you are, how the world is. Don't make me stay the same— change me, change me forever, today, change me tomorrow, make it become real and exciting and never, never stay the same. Take me over.

Hank was standing.

-Come here, he said.

Becky averted her eyes, because it was simply too real to be dealt with. Change in the mind was one thing; change in life was another. Who was she really? A rich, spoiled Jewish girl with piano lessons? Wasn't that it? A future literary giant, a Canto Club girl, a prospective Jewish wife, an Ophelia on the High School stage, a scarecrow in life, a misfit in the world, an eccentric old woman in a room, a dead corpse in the cage of the box in the ground. Who was she? She swam in the water with Agee, she played in Africa with Hemingway, she sat in irons with Faulkner and she missed her mother with Kerouac. Who was she? When Melville called she left the room, when T.S. Eliot sang she stared out the window up into the stars, was that who she was? All the books she had read, all the poems she had wrote, all the journal entries, all the boys who hated her, the teachers who were afraid of her, the old men who lusted after her, who was she? Was she Hank's, to be despised and loved and covered with kisses? Was Hank who she was?

-Do it to me now, she said.

-Oh shut up Becky. You don't even know what you're talking about.

-I'm ready to find out.

-It makes no difference to me.

He kissed the inside of her ear with his tongue making her shiver. Oh hurry up, she thought. She didn't even know what she was hurrying to. It had to take time but she had no concept of time and her body had its own rhythm and she had no concept of that either. She tried to will the whole thing with her mind and her mind was going blank.

-Just relax, for God's sake.

-Ok.

-Relax. Relax.

His voice made her feel she had known him forever and perhaps she had in some other place, a place she no idea of at this time in her life because places and times were all about the moment and this moment was Hank all over her.

Looking at him, so still, unsure of what to do with her body and her arms, she flailed against him, thighs and legs bumping, her long thin arms hugging his neck, the day taking up the heat of her thought like water evaporating into air.

Hank stopped kissing her.

Leaning against the tree, Becky watched him pick mud and grass off the sides and heels of his shoes.

-These are new, he said. I just got them.

She thought the shoes did nothing for him, they didn't fit the rest of him, the muscled energy like a Jaguar on a hunt, the white T-shirt, tight jeans around his buttocks—they did nothing for him whatsoever. In fact, she admitted to herself, the shoes were decidedly uncool.

-Why don't you wear motorcycle boots?

-I hate boots.

Cicadas reached a high pitched whine as the heat rose around them, all the sounds of the woods converging into that small space between a tree and the river and his Indian bike alone against a bush.

-Come here, he said as if cajoling an errant child who had wandered off.

She moved forward into the circle of his arms, trapping her inside, holding tight. His hips thrust into hers making her feel the hard thing inside of his jeans. Leaning back against the tight, strength of his arms Becky caught a glimpse of the river, the Mother duck playing circles with her two little ones, dipping and rising and bobbing her head up and down, in and out of the water. The babies imitated their mother, shaking water off their tails, swimming around their mother in tighter and tighter circles.

Hank's arms went around her waist holding the small part of her back.

When he pulled her close it was insistent, demanding—impossible to escape now, she thought.

-You're so thin, he said, like an antelope.

She took in a breath as he undid her bra from behind, cupping her breasts with his hands. The flesh of his against her breasts, nipples hard, his hands hot, the heat moving all over her body like warm liquid, they leaned in on each other, face touching face, Hank's hands all over her belly and her breasts, him leaning his head onto her shoulder kissing her neck and her shoulder and her eyes and not stopping for a moment to ask her how she was, and how was she? Was she the girl who stepped out of the library? Was she a different girl now?

He pulled off her halter-top and threw the bra and top onto the ground.

-They'll get dirty, she said.

-I don't care.

She stood before him topless, like a naked antelope watching the green eyes of the Jaguar coming to hunt her down. This was not the love she read about or it was something like the love that Henry Miller told her about but she was not a man, she was not Henry Miller, she was Hank's girl today. She wanted him to see her as a powerful woman but she felt like a little girl—longing to be womanized and strong, tough and cynical like Morgan, longing to even know what sort of feeling kept pounding inside of her but not knowing. It all got mixed up with heat, the dismal town they inhabited; the river—trying to remember the sound of Miles Davis. For a moment she convinced herself it was all so exciting.

-Take your pants off, he said, unzipping his jeans. The sound of the zipper echoed in the dead air. She removed her flowered underpants and the new pedal pushers she just bought at Maurice's with money from her grandmother, throwing all of it on the ground next to the bra and halter-top. Everything could get dirty now—she didn't care.

When she stood up Hank presented his body naked to her, giving it to her like a gift, the present of his stunning form, the muscular chest covered all over with fine dark hair, shoulders and arms well-developed, physically powerful—she could not fear in the face of this, although the sense of abandonment was strong. How could she love something so different from herself, so apart from reality, so much other? Becky tried to prevail on his sense of pity, pity for her small self, the sacred moment, her apprehension, but to no avail. He did not pity her, he desired her.

This is a nude man, she thought, and what a sight.

-Look at me, Becky.

-I am looking.

-I mean, look.

He stepped forward and pushed her head down to look at his penis, hard, standing out from his body as if it were separate from the rest of him. He guided her hand to touch him. She touched with just the tips of her fingers, feeling the wetness on the tip of his penis, running her palm along the length of it and thought of her father.

-Haven't you seen a man's penis before?

-Once.

-Was it like this?

He put his hands on her back and pulled her forward, kissing the tip of her hairline about the forehead, kissing along her cheek and finding her mouth, plunging into her a hand, moving it up into her vagina until she let out a cry—she could not remember what talking was. A jolt of energy moved through her pipelined to her soul, it wiped out her will to resist—he was shot all through her body. When she looked down it was not his hand inside of her but all of him, belly to belly, his force driving into her, the feeling of it stopping all emotion or reflection. They were still standing. He picked her up with him still inside, kneeling onto the ground, rolling over so that he lay on top of her, pushing. Becky closed her eyes, unable to move or fight or wonder, his arms, his kisses all over her ears, forehead, eyes. Who was living inside of her, breathing into her, who was this man? The energy of his thrusts took everything away—the day could be night—it didn't matter. Breathing became a sympathetic parcel each one gave to the other.

Ground prickled her back, grass smelled damp and sweet, purple flowers with a honeyed tang, crude river odors, but then she forgot about it. She forgot about the library

and the girls waiting by the window, she forgot about her father giving her a look of boredom and misery as she watched him pack for a business trip, she forgot about the time she pulled the fire alarm, she forgot about singing with Alberta and the Willing Workers, she forgot about her mother's tears when she quit violin lessons, when she got kicked out of camp, when she bought her first bra, when she came home and called her mother a bitch, she remembered the Mourners Kaddish said for her Grandfather when he died;

*Yit-ga-dal v'yit-ka-dash sh'mei ra-ba,  
b'al-ma di-v'ra chi-ru-tei, v'yam-lich mal-chu-tei  
b'chai-yei-chon uv'yo-mei-chon  
uv'chai-yei d'chol-beit Yis-ra-eil,  
ba-a-ga-la u-viz-man ka-riv,  
v'im'ru: A-mein.*

Hank came inside of her as she recited the prayer.

-What are you talking? He asked her, breathing heavily into her ear.

She panted underneath him, wondering why everything had gone so still.

-I am so surprised, she said.

-You feel like a woman now?

She wondered. Did women feel this way? Did Brett Ashley feel this way? The biggest surprise was what happened to all her excitement—it got all sluiced off in the breathing, and the humid static moment, his hot effort, the calmness of the river, his shoulder bones biting into her chest, his legs holding hers down flat onto the ground, the feeling of his eyelashes on her forehead, her ideas of goodness and reality bit into this gift of death. Perhaps there would never be a messiah.

He jumped off, stretched out his fine-looking body, went further toward the river to take a piss. She wanted to call him back and say,

-Well, what do you think of that?

But she said nothing. His scorn could completely undo her.

She watched his back as he pissed, the wretchedness making her cry tears of anger. -I am a Desolation Angel.

-Oh, don't get all mushy about this, for Christ's sake.

-Of course, she told him, sitting up. Silent happiness bobbed up inside of her.

Well, thank God, she thought, I'm glad that's over.

-You might bleed, he said, pulling on his jeans.

She got up, her thighs suffering, worked over, as if she'd just played two hours of tennis, and went over to her clothes to dress. As she put on the flowered underpants she looked for blood.

-I didn't bleed.

-You will.

Becky pulled the underpants down to check again and saw spots of pink, two small round bits of blood the size of a penny. Fastening her bra she watched him pull the white T-shirt over his head, grab his pack of Camels and tuck it into the sleeve, stick his wallet into his back pocket.

-Ready?

He came over and kissed her on the cheek.

-Get dressed. I'll take you to McDonalds.

## Confirmation

*Spring 1965*

It had rained the day before. May, glorious in its flower, splattered color everywhere along the boulevards and in front of everyone's houses. Back gardens proudly sported tulips, peonies, daffodils, daisies, and irises—the world smelled fresh. Becky passed a hand along the surface of the dining table, noticing her reflection in the polished wood. Her mother had gone out shopping and Alberta had left a piece of cake on the stove. Open windows brought a mild breeze. Becky looked out the dining room window and saw Tommy, the kid next door and her childhood playmate, polishing the red Chevy Impala his father had just bought him. She wore her blue and white dress and a pair of white heels. She thought of going out to show off and talk to Tommy but changed her mind.

The phone rang.

“Have you got your confirmation dress yet?” Susie Kramer asked her.

“Not yet.”

“My mom's taking me to Green's.”

“I looked at the juniors in Jacobson's but I didn't see anything I liked.”

“You've only got a week, Becky.”

“I know.”

“What are you doing tonight?”

“I have a date with this guy—Hank.”

“Is he Jewish?”

“No, Susie, I don't know what he is. He has a motorcycle and he's twenty-eight.”

“Do your parents know?”

“Are you kidding?”

“You are such a skank, Becky.”

“No I’m not, I’m a bohemian—he’s kind of a Beatnik. He lived in Greenwich Village for a while.”

“That’s sounds horrible.”

“Don’t be ignorant, Susie. People read poetry there. I gotta go.”

Becky hung up the kitchen phone and wandered into the den. She hated to admit to herself how much she lied to Suzy—not that it mattered. Hank was the brother of a friend and he did ride a motorcycle, he did live in California and Greenwich Village for a while, but now he was back from Viet Nam and he tried to kill himself with a razor blade and spent some time on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of St. Lawrence Hospital. He certainly didn’t ask her out for a date and wouldn’t anytime soon. Still, fantasies have a reality of their own.

The door to the back yard patio was open and she figured she’d put on her bikini and catch some sun so she could get a tan before Confirmation. The kid who mowed the lawn had a gorgeous tan and a really beautiful chest. She liked the way he looked over at her when she went out in her bikini, but she could never figure out what to say to him. Hi, what school do you go to? Maybe he didn’t go to school. He looked a little old to be in school. His name was Randy and he lived on the other side of Mt. Hope Avenue.

Randy was picking at something in the lawn mower when she went out with her bottle of Bain de Soleil and a blanket. She spread the blanket where she could get the most sun and still see Randy out of the corner of her eye. She brought her transistor radio and set it on the blanket.

*When the last time I saw you, you wouldn't even kiss me  
 How can you tell me how much you miss me?  
 The rich guy you're seein' must have put you down  
 When the last time I saw you, you wouldn't even kiss me  
 So welcome back, baby, to the poor side of town  
 The rich guy you're seein' must have put you down.*

Johnny Rivers sang as she watched Randy pull on the chain to get the mower started. He glanced over at her and she looked away, but not before she caught his saucy smile and his eyes appraising her in her bikini.

I'm beautiful and brilliant, Becky thought as she lay down, feeling the sun seep into her skin, the warmth piercing her body. Closing her eyes, she got lost in the summer songs from the radio. Percy Sledge singing *When a Man loves a Woman, Good Lovin'* by the Young Rascals. I'm young and sexy and cute, she thought and drifted out into a half-waking sun haze. The sound of the lawn mower, crickets and cicadas, the music from the radio--all this sound melted into her mind, hummed into her consciousness while she allowed the sun to create a glow of golden sheen on her skin. She felt more sophisticated than she was and all the world of non-Jewish boys beckoned her.

But-- (the intrusion of another thought startled her)-- I like Jewish boys better. Then thoughts of Confirmation invaded that thought. Confirmation, originally developed by the Reform movement, was conceived as a way to provide a ceremony for older children, sixteen or so. The Reform Rabbis felt thirteen was too young for a child to truly understand the meaning of Jewish law so they conceived of a ritual that would allow older children to give reverence for their studies in front of their peers, their parents and the congregation. To Becky it meant having a service and having a party and going to the beach. The beach was the best part of it all. Unlike the *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*, it was less of a religious initiation than a kind of social event—where the Confirmations could 'confirm'

(substantiate, prove, authenticate, validate, back up? the words ran through her mind in non-alphabetical order) their place as young adults without all the terror of reciting a *Haf Torah* in Hebrew. No Hebrew—just a kind of secular gliding through a candlelit sanctuary and maybe a little speech or two (in English) about some part of the Talmud or some other Jewish aspect of philosophy. Becky favored Spinoza but he wasn't on the list. She ended up with Moses Maimonides.

The darkened hallways of the synagogue smelled of must and old world depression and something cooking in the kitchen—the black women who made things for the *Shabbat* laughed in the kitchen, clanging pots and pans. Becky found herself wishing she could be in the kitchen with them, singing soul music or just banging things around and making food. She felt foolish being served by people she had more respect for than the people, the group, she was supposed to belong to.

The confirmation group straggled into the dining room, tables clothed and set for the mingling and eating after the service, which would take place at eight o'clock. Their confirmation classes were always held after school and everyone was expected to attend service afterwards—family night. Becky's father Frank Kaplan had dropped her off and gone on to play nine holes of golf with her mother Sylvia. They planned to finish nine holes in time for the service. Becky imagined her mother in her golf shorts, the burnished sheen of a tan over her light freckles; her dark curls glistening with hair spray.

Paul Silverstein walked into the room carrying his *tallis* like a pretentious child—he looked ludicrous marching around with an authority he hadn't earned. Becky looked at him with disgust.

“Paul, why do you carry that thing around all the time?”

He wouldn't disdain her with an answer.

Rabbi Phillip Waxman and Cantor Ben Cutler came from the library. Rabbi carried a sheaf of papers and a pile of books, and Cantor munched on a Danish smeared with butter. Waxman, angular, tall and scholarly, Cutler round with eyes stuffed into the folds of fat cheeks—his body waddled rather than walked. Rabbi had warmth and confidence, bushy hair steel colored, small brown eyes and a graying beard while Cantor smirked with a supercilious grin and had a faint odor of cigar trailing off his body. Both of them avoided looking at one another unless they were on the pulpit doing a service.

“Come sit down, sit down.”

Becky looked at her confirmation mates with a terrible sense of ennui. The same children she attended Sunday school with year after year after year—the boredom of it killed her--she knew them all too well. Whatever excitement life had to offer was outside this room—somewhere else. It came from the Stones or the Beatles—or Leonard Cohn or Jack Kerouac—Alan Ginsberg playing his harmonium and reciting *Howl--I want the orgy of our flesh, orgy of all eyes happy, orgy of the soul kissing and blessing its mortal-grown body/ orgy of tenderness beneath the neck, orgy of kindness to thigh and vagina/ Desire given with meat hand and cock, desire taken with mouth and ass, desire returned to the last sigh!* Not here! This Temple! She could just imagine the Rabbi's face if she recited those lines at some given time. Hah! This dark, dingy, dreary place wafting an odor of past stuff that had all the interest of dry old history books—*who will hold the dry cold hands of a dead man?* Nothing here. Nothing to digest. Philosophy interested her. Who

in the Jewish religion understood the sexual philosophical yearnings of a woman artist like herself?

“Why are we getting confirmed?” Becky asked after everyone had sat down at the table, munching on the Danish and punch one of the black girls from the kitchen had brought out for them.

“We’re talking about Shabbat today, Becky,” Rabbi reminded her as Cantor helped himself to a cherry-filled Danish. (His second, Becky observed).

“Can’t we have some coffee?” Jerry Siegel asked.

“Jerry, you’ll have plenty of time for coffee later on.”

“Later on?” Sally Fried always wore tight little mini skirts, her thighs rubbing together, some part of her ass showing when the skirt rode up.

“Do you wear underpants?” Mindy Demsky, the one devout child in the group and its self-appointed moral guardian, asked Sally looking with care at the back of Sally’s chair, as if somehow Sally’s ass might crawl up over the table and bite her.

“Shut up, Mindy. If you had an ass you’d know the answer.”

“Children! *Mein Gott!* Your language! Who taught you these things?”

“No one has to teach us,” Becky informed him.

Paul fingered the tassels of the *tallis* and cast a lascivious glance over at Becky. *He’s wondering what my breasts look like*, she thought with disgust. Paul was repellent like a black beetle she could squash with her foot.

“Today we are telling our Hebrew names so that we will choose what name to be confirmed in,” Rabbi said. Cantor nodded enthusiastically. “As you know, in the Jewish tradition a child is named only after a deceased relative. The parents take the initial of the

first name of the deceased and use that as the beginning initial of the child's name. My name is Phillip and I was named after my grandfather Phillip, who died several years before I was born. All of your parents had a certificate made when you were born with your Jewish name in Hebrew inscribed. So now, I would like you to write that name down on this pad." He handed the pad to Mindy who passed it around the table. Cantor took another Danish. (*His third?*)

Becky wrote down *Avram* on the little stenographers pad. When the pad reached Cantor he looked a moment at the list, lit his cigar that had gone out in the ashtray at his right elbow and handed the steno pad to Rabbi.

"You cannot be confirmed in the name of *Avram*," the Cantor intoned, looking at Becky with his usual disdainful sneer. "I have to go out and have my cigar," he added and both Cantor and Rabbi rose from the table. Cantor waddled out, his fat thighs encased in what Becky thought were the ugliest pair of suit pants she'd ever seen, Rabbi following close behind. Thank God her father never dressed like that, she thought. At least he had a sense of style. But Cutler was too fat for any of that, and his nasal, whining tenor voice made her feel as if someone had jabbed a poker up her spine. He can read music but he can't sing, she thought.

"Why?" she shouted after the men.

"Because Abraham was the Father of the Jewish people, Becky and you are no father!" Cutler shouted back from the hallway and left Confirmation class alone.

"God, this whole thing is idiotic." Her fellow Confirmation classmates, especially Paul, whose father had been her family doctor until her Cousin Sammy, chief of staff at

Wren Hospital, took over, sneered at her. Paul had shoved her face in the snow when they were seven and his father had to treat her for snow burn.

“How did this happen?” Irving Silverstein had asked.

“Paul shoved me into the snow,” Becky told him.

“Paul did this?”

“Why do you always have to cause trouble?” Paul asked her.

“My Hebrew name is *Avram*. My parents told me so.”

“So what?”

Rabbi Waxman ambled back in, smiling as usual.

“What’s the problem?” his soft, modulated pragmatic voice instantly soothed the crackling animosity that had hit the room when he and Cantor had walked out.

“Becky? Have you prepared your reading for today?”

“Yes, Rabbi, but—“

“But what—Becky?” Sally asked. Her father owned a soda pop distributing business. Cases of the stuff filled the storage room in the basement behind the laundry room: Cherry, Lime, Cream Soda, Black Cherry, Coke (the only flavor she loathed), Lemon, and Root Beer. The bottles were perfectly sized and the flavors were great. Unfortunately Sylvia never let her take a pop whenever she wanted—she had to ask permission. But on hot summer days when Sylvia played golf, Becky often took two or three out with her on a bike ride.

“I want to know—do the Jews have some kind of ethical system or something? I read that book on ethics and—“

“Did you read Moses Maimonides as I suggested?” Waxman asked her gently.

“I’m reading it.”

“Good. But that book on ethics--forget it for now.”

“My name. My confirmation name. It has to be *Avram*, Rabbi.”

“We’ll talk about that later Becky.”

“*The Queen* wants to be confirmed as *Avram*.” Paul sneered.

“So what?” Becky shouted.

“Children, let’s not get riled up. *Avram*—Becky—it’s just not done. You’re a girl.”

“Hardly,” Michael Blumenthal chimed in, his dark curly hair falling over his eyes, making him look like a kind of Jewish James Dean.

“Hardly? What the hell does that mean?”

“Becky said hell!” Sally laughed, popping her gum.

“I was named after my grandfather Abraham! He died before I was born. I have the certificate!” Becky calmed down suddenly. Why waste desperation on people too stupid for words?

“We’ve got to get on with class,” Rabbi suggested. Sally wore a blue angora sweater accentuating very provocative breasts that Becky noticed distracted Michael for some minutes. Becky had some breasts on her too, but Michael refused to look at them and it made her exceedingly mad. Just one more thing to stir up all those forces inside of her that she couldn’t control anyway. Rabbi opened the Talmud translation and began explaining the meaning of Shabbat.

“So, how was confirmation class, Becky?” Frank Kaplan sat in the library looking at a Modern Library copy of Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*.

“*Ah what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive,*” Frank droned as she flopped down on the teal blue couch next to his over stuffed rocking chair. She loved sitting in that chair by the window staring out at the Crab Apple tree whose blossoms always departed in April and the Birch tree with its Indian carvings, listening to Barbra Streisand through the speakers hidden in the oak paneled walls.

“You ought to read this.” He pushed the book out through the air at her, as if the words could fly off the page and into her mind by osmosis.

“I will, someday. Right now—“

“What’s the problem?” Frank put a finger in the book and looked at her with what Becky called ‘the pragmatic look,’ the look that said he could solve her problems with intelligent, thoughtful wisdom as he always did.

“They won’t let me be confirmed in my Hebrew name.”

“Oh, and why not?”

“Because it’s *Avram* and they said I am a girl and girls can’t be confirmed in the name of the Father of the Jewish people or something.”

“Oh, I see. Well we named you after your mother’s father Abraham Ostrovsky, honey, and I gave you *Avram*. I see no problem with that.”

“Neither do I.”

“Yes. What do you want me to do? You have to be confirmed.”

“Yes, I have to. Why do I have to?”

“Because I want you to.”

“Well, how can I when they won’t let me? Do I have to pick a different name?”

“No, honey, you don’t. One of us will go and talk to the Rabbi and take care of it.”

“It’s the Cantor who objects.”

“Fine. Just let me or your mother handle Ben.”

Frank smiled and opened the book again.

“Thanks Dad.”

“Give me a kiss.” Becky walked over to her father and kissed him on the cheek, smelling his aftershave (*Mennen*) feeling the soft down of the evening’s beard growth and the yielding, pliant cheek underneath.

“I love you,” she said and closed the library door softly behind her.

Sylvia Kaplan wore her incredible bottle green Chanel suit when she drove to temple in the baby blue Thunderbird that Frank had given her for Chanukah a year before. She had green alligator shoes and an alligator purse to match. Her hair was perfect—she had the entitlement of the wife of the man who donated the land the temple sat on and the look of Elizabeth Taylor. Her heels clicked militaristically on the polished floor as she marched into the foyer ready to do battle with the Rabbi, Cantor and anyone else she needed to.

“Sylvia! What a surprise.” Cutler, cigar in hand, waddled out of his office. “What brings you to temple? —Sisterhood isn’t having a special meeting are they? And Hadassah meets tomorrow, if I’m not mistaken.”

“I missed a stock club meeting to come here and talk to you, Ben,” Sylvia spoke, her authoritative voice echoing off the walls of the foyer, large windows bringing the slanted harsh sunlight of a brilliant day to bounce off her vigorous auburn curls and the green suit.

“You look wonderful.”

“Thank you Ben.”

“Would you like to come into my office?”

Sylvia followed his fat little form out of the foyer down the hallway to the plush carpeted office with the deep mahogany desk and gave a cursory glance at the wall filled with pictures and placards.

“Ben, let’s not be ceremonious.”

“Of course not,” he said, stubbing his cigar into the ashtray to his right.

“Becky was named for my father, Abraham Ostrovsky.”

“How wonderful, Sylvia.”

Cutler got up and closed the door.

“I see no reason to change her Hebrew name now. It is *Avram*, after my father Abraham and has been since she was born.”

“But Sylvia, Abraham was the father of the Jewish people and—and it’s a male name and Becky is a girl!”

“Ben, I know that.”

“Confirmation is a coming of age ritual, Sylvia—perhaps not quite with as much weight as a *Bat* or *Bar Mitzvah* but, nevertheless, quite important--especially here at

*Shaarey Zedek*. We've got a mixed congregation you know—reform, conservative and orthodox and we need to provide something for all our members.”

“I didn't give Becky a *Bat Mitzvah* Ben because that's a reform tradition—a new one I might add. In my day, girls didn't have *Bat Mitzvahs*. So things have changed, haven't they? Girls can now get up and recite the *Haf Torah* with the boys!”

“Yes, that's right.”

“And girls ought to be confirmed in the Hebrew name they've been given at birth.” Sylvia's eyes carried a glint of light before they glanced pointedly above the Cantor's head to the wall where a picture of Frank's father and mother stood outside the grounds that were to later become the Temple, shovels in their hands, smiling next to Cantor and Rabbi.

“We've been here since the start,” Sylvia concluded.

“Yes, you have. And no question—generous donors—Frank's tireless work raising money for UJA—“

“We were given a state visit to Israel last year—“

“Yes—“

“Where we met Ben Gurian and Moshe Dayan and—“

“All right, Sylvia.”

“Ben, this means so much to me. And it will mean a lot to Becky later in her life.”

“Yes, of course,” Cantor said, voice laced with a *soupcou* of defeat.

Sylvia smiled a winning smile and rose to leave.

“I'll see you out, Sylvia.”

“Don't bother. I parked in front.”

Ben Cutler stood as Sylvia left his office, looking at his half-burned cigar with a mixture of feelings, most of them just below the surface of his professional smile.

Three days before the service Sylvia took Becky to Saks Fifth Avenue in Southfield where they found a fabulous dress. In the foyer of the temple, just before the service began, the girls in their formal dresses and heels mingled with the boys in suits and ties. Excitement, awkward feelings and nervousness filled the air and Michael even looked at her for a second.

“Is that a new dress Becky?”

“Yeah.”

Michael looked heavenly in his suit. Becky looked at his dark hair and felt a pang-something knotted and exciting in her belly. *Sixteen is not too young for sex!* She just wondered how to get Michael alone for an hour. Maybe at The Jack Tarr hotel where the party was being held after the service? She imagined she could somehow trick him to coming in the elevator with her and they could find an open room. These kinds of thoughts never scared her. Life was meant to live dangerously! The moon was gold outside matching the soft golden glow of the candlelight in the sanctuary; her father and mother, with all the other parents and family, sat near the front waiting for the Confirmation group to come down the aisle.

Sally got confirmed as Sarah, Paul got confirmed as something or other, and Becky received her copy of the Talmud and a tassel as *Avram*, Father of the Jewish people. When Rabbi said, Becky Kaplan, I confirm you in the temple as *Avram*, Becky glowed. She heard no trace of mockery in his voice. Something lit the inside of her

heart—she was bursting with a power that could not be contained. When she looked over at Michael he turned away from her gaze.

She rode with her parents to the Jack Tarr Hotel where a ballroom had been decorated to the hilt for the party. A long table with food and a punchbowl occupied one side of the room. There was a dance band (her father's kind of music) and a dance floor, tables set with plates. The adults had a cash bar and Frank went immediately over to shake hands with other fathers and bring two Old Fashions to Sylvia, who stood with several women around the stage.

Michael positioned himself with the other boys on one side of the room—the girls huddled together exclaiming over each other's dresses on the other side. The lights dimmed, the band began to play awful covers of Beatles tunes, and Becky cast a glance at Michael, whose back was to her across the room. She stood inside the light, the yellow hue reflecting something of her hope, her body filled with a burst of energy; Michael's eyes shot past her standing in her new white Saks Fifth Avenue dress and settled on Sally Fried laughing at someone over at the punch bowl. When Becky looked up Michael had already crossed the room to talk to Sally.

She glimmered alone with the spirit of *Avram*; ethics hardly mattered in the world. What were ethics anyway when no one lived as if they existed? She felt angry and cheated—how dare Michael take away the moment of her triumph and her joy! It was as if he wanted to punish her for succeeding. And yet, what had she succeeded at? A moment of pride when the Rabbi announced she could be confirmed as *Avram*? Who would know or care about this in the future? Now was all that mattered and now she wanted Michael to see her, to notice her, to revel in her triumph, in her power, in her

beauty. But then she realized something else—perhaps it was not so much a coherent thought as just a fleeting moment of dread. Something told her that in her life all her greatest moments would be accompanied by an equal measure of shame, embarrassment and rejection. *Must we be rejected because we are women, different, bold—grasping for the same turf as the men? My Moon is just as brilliant as theirs,* but then, she looked over at Michael and saw him leaning ever so close to Sally. He was the Sun, not the Moon and could a girl be another kind of Sun? Could a woman be as brilliant as all that? She stood in her triumph alone, it seemed: rejected, angry and betrayed. Maybe even vengeful, but without a clue how to enact it.

It wasn't hard to imagine striding across the floor, saying Michael's name, taking his hand and leading him onto the floor into a dance. She knew he must feel something toward her. It wasn't that hard to do the very thing she imagined. She walked across the floor, colored lights playing on the wooden, polished surface, and stood in front of Michael, whose cool, smooth expression trained on Sally's supercilious mouth.

“Hi Michael.”

He did not answer her, but a flicker in his cheek muscles showed Becky that he heard.

Sally looked away, suppressing a sarcastic grin.

“Michael, I said hi.”

Michael did not turn to look at her, but tilted his face somewhat to the side.

“All right,” he said as if to dismiss her.

“All right, what?”

Sally giggled.

“I just wanted to say hi.”

“So—you said it.”

“How did you—wasn’t the service grand?”

“Grand?” Sally said in a nasty tone. “What kind of expression is that?”

“It’s not an expression!”

“Sally,” Michael, warned, as if he and Sally held some secret information only they knew.

“It was wonderful. I was so proud of you,” Becky said, looking at the side of Michael’s face.

“What for?”

“Well, you looked--”

Sally spit out a burst of a laugh that ended in a cough.

“I mean—I just thought—you looked like you were enjoying yourself.”

“I’m glad it’s over.”

“Were you proud of me?”

“I think you’re weird, Becky, what can I say?”

“I don’t understand.”

Sally smiled a knowing smile at Michael and laughed.

“Want some more punch, Michael? I’ll get you some.” Sally sang it like a song.

“Sure.” He handed Sally his glass and turned to Becky looking her full in the face.

Sally wondered why all her sophistication fell away among Jewish guys. Maybe she was better off with the Randy guy who mowed the lawn. The world of Jewish men was just too hard to take! They always spoiled her triumph—they hated her, they thought her too

stupid, too smart or both. She could never convince them that a rebellious girl could be a good Jewish mother! And who cared about that right now? *I'm not going to be a mother. I'm not going to be his Jewish mother, anyway.* But it wasn't about mothers. What was it? All these gorgeous, beautiful, intelligent Jewish guys and they always looked at her with such—contempt! Like, she wasn't good enough for them or something! Or too good. Or different. Or not controllable. Oh, why did she want their approval so much? Why did she want Michael's so much—right now? Didn't he find her- “I don't know what you want from me, Becky.” Michael interrupted her thoughts.

“I just want you to be proud of me like I am of you.”

“For what? For making the whole thing stupid? You're not a man, you know.”

“I never said I was!”

*Why can't I be witty when I need to be?* She wished she could find some sarcastic, nasty retort to put him down and shut him up but the fact was, she feared him and she loved him at the same time, and his coldness froze her heart so deeply she felt as if it would be better to die. The shame of being ignored!

Sally came back with the punch, touching Michael's arm lightly and closing the circle off from Becky.

“Let's go out. I've got my dad's car--”—she glanced over at Becky, “we're going to the lake.”

“The lake? Are you guys going to the lake?” Becky looked directly at Sally who returned her stare with a haughtiness that was older than her years. “I didn't think your parents would let you go, Becky, so we didn't ask you.”

“I'm sorry,” Michael said to Becky.

Was he really sorry? Did he really feel something? Becky wanted to believe Michael was hiding his real feelings for her because of the social issues. But if he were hiding his real feelings, what were his real feelings? And what were the social issues? Couldn't he show that he understood her triumph?

"I guess you just don't appreciate me, do you Michael?" Becky spat at Michael, turned on her heel and walked away. The lamest exit line of her most supreme and lame life.

Now what? She'd made her exit from the party and there was no turning back. She almost wished Tommy was there but he wasn't Jewish. Again—she always struck out with Jewish guys. Maybe she'd been born into the wrong tribe. What was the use of staying there and watching everyone sneak off to the lake without her? She'd be left alone with all the other outcasts—milling around trying to look happy, knowing they were the pariahs and all the cool crowd had gone to the lake, aware that all the excitement had already left the room. I bet even Paul is going, she thought with bitterness.

Walking out into the hotel lobby she saw Rabbi talking to her mother and father.

"Becky!" Frank Kaplan reached his arm out to include her in the circle.

"Hi dad."

"Why aren't you in the party with the other kids?"

"Oh, I was."

Frank looked at his skinny blond daughter and felt her confusion, but he beamed his pride to the top of her head. She did nothing to dispel his admiration. A meek person cannot take a perilous path, Frank reflected and Becky would never be meek.

The Rabbi smiled at Becky. Sylvia standing next to Frank in her dark gray Chanel suit with her Louis Vuitton bag and Prada shoes looked proud, impossibly elegant and haughty—she brought up fear in Becky. She knew deep inside that she was another kind of girl, would be another kind of woman—she could never use her mother, as cold as ice and as arctic as the Russian tundra, as a role model. She had no idea how Sylvia had paved the way for her initiation as *Avram*, it never occurred to her that maybe, in her own way, Sylvia had tried to pass the baton. She could only see fear of the future--finding her own way through the maze of womanhood. The thought of leaving Sylvia behind, with her purses and matching shoes and designer suits, made her feel lonely as hell.

“So—now you are *Avram*.”

Becky’s sullen look dispelled the joy.

“I’m not anything,” she replied and caught her mother’s frozen smile for just a second.

## Smoke

*June, 1966*

Becky sat home for several days, dying of misery and world-weariness, as if she had just digested the entire history of sexual ennui into her slender fifteen-year-old frame, drunk the green liquid of antiquity and found it wanting.

Her friend Cheryl, the self-appointed go-between, relishing her role as the portal to the forbidden, called Becky one bleak evening when the sun, indicting Becky's eyes with a kind of longing and shame she had never known, dipped behind the roofs of houses and passed out of sight to the other side of the earth.

-Becky, how's things?

-Fine.

-How's Hank?

-You know how he is.

-Has he called?

-Nope.

-He doesn't have a place to live—he's staying with his brother. I told you  
Becky—

-What?

-Hank's a little strange. I told you that.

Hank. School over. The shipwreck of summer ahead. When the last bell rang Cheryl and Becky went to the little grocery store off Linden Street and they had Cherry Phosphates. Becky moved a finger around the wet frost outside of her glass, spelling H-A-N-K.

-I like him.

-Don't waste your time.

Cheryl was tough. She had her own car, a Ford Lark, dark red, with a choke on the dashboard that looked like a lighter. She smoked Larks to go with her car. Her father was over in Vietnam with the Marines; her mother drank beer all day from a plastic glass with red flowers on it, walking around in a bathrobe with blue rubber curlers in her hair. Becky preferred to go over to Cheryl's—they could do whatever they wanted—they could smoke and drink gin and play music in Cheryl's tiny bedroom. They never did much but sit around and listen to records and talk about boys.

-Hank is not a boy, Cheryl told her.

-I know that, Becky said. I like him.

-Look, there's a lot about Hank you don't know.

-Like what? St. Lawrence?

-That's not all.

-He got a girl pregnant.

-Oh?

-She had the baby.

-Where is she?

-Up in Traverse City, I think—I don't know.

-Is she living with the baby?

-I guess. She's with her mother.

Cheryl dropped Becky off at home. It was 2:00 pm and she had just a few hours to get some tanning in before the rays of the sun slanted away from the house. She put on

her bikini and went onto the patio, easing herself into the lounge chair, slathering Bain de Soleil over her legs, thighs, arms—remembering how it felt when Hank touched them.

Her mother opened the patio door.

Sylvia Kaplan wore an off-white golf skirt with a navy silk shell and her gold flats. Her dark short brown hair plastered with hair spray, never moved but sat on her head like a brown helmet with perfectly shaped curls. You could see the scalp in between the curls. Sylvia's green eyes were hooded, her lovely, unwrinkled, tanned skin freckled at the nose, her lithe body with the glorious legs Becky had inherited, polished and shining. The mouth, in its perpetual expression of disdain and frustration turned slightly up at the corners, a little glimmer of expectation betraying the tight control Sylvia maintained with extreme effort.

-I'm going out to the club to play golf.

-Fine.

-Virginia's leaving in an hour. The steak's defrosting in the fridge. Will you put it in around 6:00 please?

-Yes. Becky turned onto her back—she always ended up with an uneven tan, the front part of her browner than the back, so she wanted to make sure she got the color all over this summer.

-When's dad coming home?

-He has a business meeting.

-Again?

Sylvia slammed the patio door shut and Becky heard the sound of the electric garage opening.

After her mother left, Becky leaned back into the chaise and allowed the sun to soak into her skin, feeling heat on her buttocks and went to the place she reserved for Hank. She wrote possible scenarios in her head—dates, moments, phrases, experiences they would have—she exploited the situation to every possible advantage, except he still did not call. What about the baby? Every time the thought came up she compartmentalized it somewhere else. What would her parents do if she got pregnant? Her father would never send her away, that's for sure. He'd have a solution—they'd figure it out. They could send Sylvia away—she'd probably need it, if I got pregnant, Becky thought with a smile. Sylvia gone: just her and her father playing music, reading and eating out. This fantasy occupied Becky for a minute before the thoughts slid back to Hank. What is he doing now? she wondered. Riding the Indian somewhere up the back roads? She longed to be on the back of his bike again, watching the world roll by like a film reeling it's fast, sweet story as they sped down roads. School's over, she thought, and the long summer stretched ahead of her like the pages of *Ulysses* she was reading, only the book was far more interesting than her life.

She spent nights looking up at the stars from the roof of the bike shed, listening to Beatles music on her transistor radio. Some nights she got Cousin Brucie on WABC New York and imagined Manhattan, the brilliant lights and all those crazy people and she was one of them, wandering the village, having coffee with Bob Dylan, dinner with John Lennon—not a groupie, exactly, but a gorgeous marvelous woman they admired because of her incredible mind and enormous wit and vitality. Foolish girl, woman of the world, what was she? Sun shine for me, she thought, friends and lovers, bring me all of them.

-Why don't you play tennis with Beebe? Sylvia asked her after watching her daughter wander the house in a daze for the past week since school let out. Setting a tuna fish sandwich with a pickle on the side on the placemat in front of Becky, she watched this girl of hers, a complete mystery, sitting in a reverie at the breakfast room table staring out the window. Becky's glass of coke and (fooling herself as unknown to Sylvia) gin, gave her a slightly philosophical take on the world. Sylvia had noticed the gin bottle disappearing and wondered if it were Frank or herself in lost moments.

-God, mother, I hate Beebe.

-What's wrong with her?

-Besides being retarded?

Sylvia put a napkin next to Becky's plate.

-She can't play. I always have to run after her balls. It's no fun.

--Well, you can go to the club with your father and play nine holes or something.

Or swim in the pool.

-He's at work.

-You can meet us over there for dinner around five.

-Do I have to?

-I'll pick you up. I'm not cooking tonight.

-Fine.

The thought of the club made Becky nauseous.

-I'd rather stay home, she spoke to the wall.

She waited until Sylvia's Lincoln turned the corner before she put on her albums—sometimes it was the Beatles, sometimes it was Miles Davis or Chris Connor or

Chet Baker—sometimes Simon and Garfunkle or the Stones. She sat in the library in the pale blue rocking chair, staring out the window at the birch tree, drinking gin and coke, listening to music and thinking about Hank.

The summer solstice was Friday night and Cheryl said she'd pick her up—she had some news. They planned to cruise the gut—drive fast up and down Capitol avenue after all the stores were closed, listening to the radio and shouting at boys in cars. Then they'd all go over to McDonalds and mess around. Becky thought the whole thing was stupid but she had nothing else to do.

When she got into the car Cheryl lit a cigarette.

-I've got to teach you how to smoke.

Becky took a Lark from Cheryl's pack, lit up from Cheryl's lighter and immediately felt like her mother who always stood at the kitchen window drinking coffee and staring out the window at the driveway, as if something might happen sometime—a Cossack might come riding out of the blue and burn the village or something.

-Why do they say 'Winston tastes good like a cigarette should'? There's no taste to this. Cigarettes don't have flavor.

-Shut up and smoke it, Becky.

Cheryl turned on the radio. She wasn't part of Becky's Canto literary crowd and she didn't give a damn. Something about the incongruity of these two girls hanging out together fascinated both of them and everyone else. Cheryl, with her impossibly short dark hair, olive skin and enormous brown eyes with dark lashes she made even darker and longer with mascara, her ubiquitous hoop earrings, low-cut shirts showing a bit of breast at the top, her nose for the dangerous, fascinated Becky. The Canto girls were

serious and maybe Morgan was a bit dangerous in a mercenary, practical way, but none of them had the sheer audacious skankiness of Cheryl. And there was Becky: the impossibly thin, entitled Jewish girl with the long blond curls and the extended delicate, hands with their intelligent fingers—no one could figure out why they liked each other, except them. Cheryl didn't read but she'd had sex and she knew about things. Becky studied with Cheryl, wanting to know some of the things she knew, but not everything. Maybe now she might know more than Cheryl, but she could not go into detail about it. Mostly she just wanted to hang out with Cheryl and watch. She was good to have around downtown because things could get tough. Some of the guys who cruised the gut were hoods, they wore leather jackets, stole things, worked in gas stations, quit school—some had been in juvenile hall. They were nothing like the stupid Jewish jerks she met in Youth Group or the boys her father introduced her to. She didn't think these Jewish guys had penises, let alone know what to do with them.

Except Abe Green's son, who told her to suck his dick when they went down to Miami on a family vacation. They stayed in Myer Siegel's geriatric hotel. The place stank of urine and age. Old Jewish women, who lived there all winter, sat around the pool playing Canasta and Mah Jong, the folds of skin under their arms hanging down to their stomachs, the creases of their faces laced with tanning lotion. She hated going swimming in the pool in her little bikini with all those fat Matriarchs staring at her with a mixture of indulgence, sadness and forbidden pain. She felt angry and irrational at the same time. They gave her lectures about saving herself.

The husbands of these women always talked about their money, they grinned wickedly at Becky as she walked by, they had skinny arms and legs, they sat around the

pool playing cards, laughing at jokes she couldn't understand, walking gingerly to their rooms while their wives shouted orders at them. When the husbands grinned she could see the gold in their teeth. There was something cynical and lascivious about their attitude, Becky thought. Life for them had become simply the mastery of the material—they had no ideals or dreams, at least none that she found herself willing to research.

The husbands, they had plenty of dreams: dreams that had died in sweat shops and factories, dreams that had died in running auto parts businesses and clothing shops and textile distributorships, insurance companies—business, business, it was always business, and raising little American children like Becky not to have the same future, dreams that were resurrected with terrible despair as they sat in temple on High Holy day picking snatches of memory from childhood—Russian childhoods filled with poverty and fear and family. The husbands had dreams that drove them into making dirty jokes as they looked at the woman they had married, the once beautiful Jewish girls with dark curls and flashing eyes, now fat and nasty and yelling all the time. The husbands remembered nights of sweaty sex, the final darkness when the kids were in bed, sitting on the porch drinking beer and looking out on the street, watching the street lamps come on. The husbands had dreams, oh they had dreams, and it all boiled down to the beautiful little tanned form of Becky Kaplan waltzing by them as they played cards by the pool.

-I hate this place, Becky told Wendy as they walked through the lobby, where a bunch of geriatric Jewish people sat drinking orange juice and eating the complimentary bagels, cream cheese and lox at \$5.00 a pound.

-Me too.

-Why do we stay here?

-Dad and Myer are old friends.

-Why can't we stay at the Balmoral like we did last year?

-I don't know.

Becky reminisced about the last vacation in Miami. At the Balmoral she had met this cute Miami guy who took her dancing.

Frank came into the lobby, wearing red golf pants and a yellow polo shirt. Becky thought he looked like a bumblebee.

-Becky, I've got some plans for you. Wendy's going shopping with your mother.

-Oh God, Wendy said.

-She wants to buy you some clothes, Frank told her.

Wendy hated clothes.

-Why can't I go shopping, dad? I love clothes.

-I'll take you to Neiman Marcus tomorrow.

-Ok. So what've you got planned? Becky asked.

-Abe Green is down here and he wants you to go sailing with his son, Barry.

-When?

-This afternoon.

Barry Green took her out on his father's boat in the bay, a small sunfish, trying to show off that he knew how to sail. He bragged about how much money his father made and how he was going into the business one day. Becky was not in the least impressed. They got out somewhere off shore; Barry put the boat in irons and unzipped his pants.

-Suck my dick, Becky.

She looked down at his white underpants, up at the sky, praying for divine intervention or something and back at his ugly, greased hair, thinking she might be sick.

-Oh, go fuck yourself, Barry.

Barry pulled his dick out of his pants and said, -Oh, Becky—look—I'm fucking myself.

She hated him then—he was so stupid. She told him if he didn't pull the thing in and get them to shore quick she would tell his father and her's. Barry obeyed and the sail back he avoided her eyes, looking arrogant and angry at the same time. Barry had trouble docking the boat; Becky walked off and left him there to handle the ropes by himself.

Back at the hotel Frank quizzed her about how the date went.

-Fine, she answered.

-So, do you like him? We're having dinner with the Green's tonight.

The thought made her ill.

-I feel sick Dad, too much sun.

-You know, Abe is business partner.

-So what?

She left the room and went to hers', flopping down on the hard, hotel mattress, wondering when they'd go home. Wendy's boxes of clothes sat unpacked at the end of the bed.

Hank was not stupid like that.

Cheryl and Becky got downtown and the whole place was lit up with car lights playing off the street and darkened storefronts, even Kresges was closed, horns honking,

kids driving old cars sixty, seventy miles an hour up and down Capitol. The sound of radios blasting summer air—these children consuming life; wanting to demolish the night like hungry jackals devouring the kill.

After racing to one end of the street they'd turn around and go back to the other end, honking and screaming out the window. It was mindless and electrifying. June 21<sup>st</sup> a full moon hung in the sky, a design in the destiny of the life of this night.

Cheryl revved her Lark and shouted at some guys in the car next to them. Becky looked over and saw how young they were—pimply. Maybe not even old enough to drive.

-Hey—there's a cop car down there! One of them shouted.

-We better get out of here, Cheryl said, whipping the car around and heading off for McDonalds.

McDonalds parking lot, next door to the all-night grocery, spilled out with teenagers milling, pumped up and excited, restless, hanging outside in groups drinking coke and showing off. Some girls huddled together watching the boys primp and preen, others mixed groups tussled and baited and teased. Some guys, older than the rest, arrived with bottles in brown paper bags.

Becky wore her tightest white jeans paired with a black lace gypsy shirt and had wound a black satin ribbon all in and out of her peppercorn curls, tying some up and letting a good deal of it tumble down her face and neck and back. She put on black hi-heeled sandals she could barely walk in.

Sylvia had eyed her in the kitchen before Cheryl arrived to pick her up.

-You look like a Shiksa.

-And what does a Shiksa look like, mom?

- Nice Jewish girls don't dress like that.

-Nice Jewish girls bore me silly.

-You don't know what you're talking about, Sylvia snapped and lit a cigarette, looking out the kitchen window.

-I know more than you think, no thanks to you.

-Your smart mouth is going to get you in trouble someday.

-So what?

Becky wanted to smack her mother but she knew that would never happen. Her mother wanted to smack her but she knew it wasn't going to do any good.

-You look sexy, Cheryl told her. Maybe Hank will be there.

-Is that the news?

Cheryl didn't answer.

Becky's body tensed up when they got out of the car. Cheryl's gold earrings flashed against her tanned neck. She wore a tight black T-shirt with her breasts spilling out of the top and sides and her bra strap showing, tiny little black short-shorts and hi-heeled sandals, beige, with red flowers stuck on top.

Becky studied Cheryl's look carefully.

Cheryl's really a shiksa, she thought, making a mental note.

Cheryl wore thick black eyeliner that night, the night of Summer Solstice, heavy iridescent shadow on the lips, her nails long blood-red polished claws. The guys rushed up to her, with Becky hanging back behind. Cheryl had an easy manner, joking, laughing, swaying her hips around, bumping into bodies.

-Hey Ray! Cheryl shouted across the parking lot. Ray loped over, a big fat guy with long greasy hair and a dirty yellow T-shirt on. Cheryl and Ray hugged tight.

-This is my friend Becky.

Ray glanced over at Becky and sneered, then looked at Cheryl.

-Hi, Becky said to his back.

She stood there feeling stupid, not knowing what to do. A bunch of guys and some skinny girls were laughing over to her left. She wanted to get out of there but she was stuck until Cheryl was ready to leave and it didn't look like that would be for a while. Cheryl hooked up with her latest guy—Mike, wiry, bad skin, leather jacket, shifting eyes. He grabbed Cheryl over to his Impala and they began making out like crazy, his hands all over Cheryl's breasts. Becky turned away and bumped right into Hank.

-Hey—I thought I'd find you here. His voice sent her into the place she'd been waiting for—no amount of fake poise could hide the proud passion in her eyes.

-Yeah, I'm here.

-Want to take off?

She couldn't breath. He wore an indigo blue shirt, turned up at the collar, off-white chinos and his penny loafers. She touched his arm, feeling the cloth of the shirt—the material soft and grainy—his muscle underneath. She wanted to sing and fly, hug and kiss, but she just stood there looking up at him.

-I'm over here, he said.

She followed him across the parking lot to a green Falcon.

-Where's your bike?

-I got it in the shop. This is my brother's.

He opened the door for her.

-I know a place that plays some good jazz, he said as they pulled out of the parking lot.

-What about Cheryl?

-What about her?

-She's supposed to take me home.

-I'll bring you by here later.

Becky's heart sank—she didn't want to come back—she wanted to stay out all night with Hank.

-Where we going?

-The Black and Tan. What time your parents want you home, little Jewish girl?

-One o'clock.

-How'd you talk your dad into that?

-He's away on business. Mom said ok.

-Nice mommy.

-Not always. She saw his Camels on the seat. -Can I have one?

-You smoking now, baby?

-Yeah. She took a cigarette and he pushed in the car lighter.

### The Black and Tan

Inside the Black and Tan was like a door into the elemental, a hut, a cave, a mushroomed hole in the ground. Just one long room with the barest of decoration—a few paintings of African women and men on the wall, a long, low bar at which sat a huddle of black men hunched over drinks, a small stage with a microphone, a piano and drum kit, people sitting at tables laughing, drinking, eyeing one another reading thoughts as if they were slips of paper, a place both ugly and gorgeous for the dank, sweet smell of it. Tables and booths lined the walls, men wore suits with glorious ties and women wore brilliant silk and cotton, polyester, rayon, nylon in colors and some wore black. An old woman in a huge chocolate muumuu, looking about seventy, wearing a blond wig, with strange, buggy eyes came up to hug Hank.

-Who your little girl?

He hugged her back.

-Shirley, this here's my friend Becky Kaplan, Becky, this is Shirley Henderson.

-Pleased to meet you, Shirley rasped, offering the tips of her fat fingers for a handshake. She wore enormous ugly rings.

-Is Billy playing tonight?

-He'll be by later, Honey. Her eyes turned to look at Becky with a stare that cut into her chest like a razor.

-Why don't you two go sit down—I'll get Willy to bring you something.

Hank grabbed Becky's elbow, steering her toward a table at the back.

They sat down and Becky stared at the salt and peppershakers.

-Why do they call this the Black and Tan?

-Why do you think?

She looked around and saw a lot of blacks; no tans and they were the only whites there.

A few musicians wandered up to the stage and got out their instruments. There was a horn player, a sax, a drummer and a piano player.

-Billy plays the keys. He's boss I want to tell you. Real mean stuff.

-I love jazz, she told him

-Yeah, he said, stabbing her with his disdainful eyes.

-My dad has been giving me jazz records since I was a kid.

-You still are a kid.

-I got Chet Baker's new album.

-Huh. He loves Lucille.

-Who's Lucille?

Hank laughed.

-God, you are so naïve sometimes. Lucille's everywhere. And a lot of people are looking for her. But not many seem to find her. She is very mysterious. Those that do find her, usually have to pay for her in more ways than one. She can kill you. She can get you fired. And she can have you thrown in jail. But, it seems they still want her.

-How can she do that? Becky asked, not understanding a word of it.

-Never mind, he said, what're going to have?

She tried to think of something different than her usual gin and coke.

-An Old Fashioned.

-Christ, that's an old man's drink. Something for those rich assholes who play golf at the club, or something

She didn't mention her father was one of those assholes.

-Ok, well, you order something and I'll what you have.

Hank lifted his hand and Shirley nodded to Willy who walked over to their table.

Willy wore polyester, a deep wine-colored shirt and gray pants. He looked like an obsequious jerk to Becky, his skinny pants tapered at the ankle, and he had buckteeth.

-Hank, my man. Willy and Hank slapped hands. -This your girl?

-Yeah, Willy this is Becky Kaplan.

Willy's eyes slid all over her, oozing like dirty water.

-Canadian Club, Hank said.

-Sure she don't want a Shirley Temple?

Hank laughed.

-Breakin' her in, I see. Becky hated him instantly and forever.

Willy smiled at her breasts and went back to the bar.

-Now obviously, don't tell anyone about this. They could get busted big time and shut down.

The band began tuning up—the horn player had a sweet sound, the drummer ticked a little off his high hat and the piano player ran glissando up and down the keys.

-Do they have a singer?

-Yeah, Shirley sings. This is her place.

-You mean, she owns it?

-She and her dead husband. She owns it; she works it.

The band began playing in earnest and reached into her. Jazz was something she felt she knew; she could sink her mind into it. She didn't have to talk to Hank and try and figure out the crazy things he said. The jazz took her away from sitting at the table, from the feeling she had just being there. She closed her eyes and listened. They were playing Basie's 'L'il Darlin'.

-I know this; she said feeling vulnerable.

Hank looked at her out of the bottom of his green eyes, head tilted off to the side, as if scrutinizing her soul. At that moment she thought he looked like James Dean, not Marlon Brando.

-Good, that's why I took you here.

Willy brought the drinks.

Shirley walked up to the stage and stood up in front of the mike. The band slid into a slow intro and she began singing: *I just want something to live for*. Her voice low, sultry, filled with aging despair and reflection with a bitter taste of heaven lost—the spectrum of divine. Becky vanished; letting herself drink the whole of it into every part of her body—filled up with the liquid pleasure of the notes, the horn and Shirley's voice. The song was sexier than sex, the song made her feel like a woman.

-Now don't drink it fast, sweetheart, just sip it slowly.

When Hank said 'sweetheart' something hit the pit of her stomach.

She took a taste of the bitter liquid, feeling a hot burning go down inside of her, and started to relax.

-This feels good.

Hank nodded, looking at the band.

-Wanna dance? he reached his hand across the table.

-Not now, she kept sipping, letting the music move into her, making pictures of color and light, allowing her to go away somewhere. His presence became an interruption to the mood of the horn player who laid sadness all over her like silk, draping its fine texture from the inside out.

-Are we going back to McDonald's later?

-Are you kidding?

-But—

-Forget it Becky.

The song wound up. A small black man wearing a little brown hat perched on the top of his head moved quietly onto the stage and whispered something to the guy at the piano who got up. The room applauded.

-Yeah! A voice came out from a dark corner on the other side of the room. —You blow it Billy!

Billy sat down and played on the keys the kind of romance she wanted from Hank.

After Billy and the band got warmed up they started cooking. Couples went out on the floor and the place shifted to a new level. Becky felt the energy lift and allowed herself to pour out into the space and time of the moment—it felt holy, natural, more true than anything else that had transpired in her life.

-Are you restless? You want to dance? Hank asked her.

-No, I just want to listen to the music. Is that all right?

-I don't care what you do.

-Maybe you're restless, she offered.

-You don't know what I am, Hank said, lighting a cigarette.

His words stung her. Was he here with her? What's the matter with him?

A young black woman eyed Hank from a table next to them. Shirley began singing *Someone to Watch Over Me*. Hank eyed the woman back. She wore a deep red silk chemise with a flower at the meeting of her breasts, and a black ivory amulet around her neck. Her hair wasn't straightened like a lot of black kids Becky knew—it was frizzy and short and close to her head. Her gold earrings set off her glistening ebony skin and high, imperial forehead.

She looks like an African princess, Becky thought. I wish I were black.

When Hank looked back at Becky she felt diminished by comparison.

-I guess I'm going to walk around and talk to some friends. You can sit here and listen if you want to.

Hank went over to the table where the woman was and stood up near her, talking and laughing. The woman smiled back with big white teeth and a wide smile. Her high, smart breasts flashed out of the chemise. Becky could see the nipples through the dress. She imagined Hank could see them too. The girl stood up and leaned into Hank, laughing and looking up at his eyes.

Hank touched the woman's arm and Becky saw her melt under his touch. The band played louder and louder—the sax player got into a long, tortured riff that made Becky's heart pound. Billy on the piano gave his soul, annihilating the room with chords that teased the hearts of dancers and drinkers and smokers and listeners. Willy brought another round of drinks and set them on the table.

-This on the house. They cookin' ain't they? He said, leaning against the table.

Becky stared into her drink, twirling the swizzle stick with the cherry stuck on it.

-Yeah, she said, hoping he'd go away.

-Looks like your man's sidling up to a mighty nice frame over there.

Becky looked up at Willy wishing him dead. Willy scanned the dance floor.

-Her guy's ain't gonna be too pleased. Well, I gotta get back to work.

He winked at her. His sly smile and the measured wink made her wish she'd had a back up plan for this excursion. Willy slid away, going from table to table. The place filled up. More people came in the door. The horn player went nuts. The dance floor was packed, Billy got crazy on the keys, and the drummer went with him. Everything smelled of sweat and perfume and jazz. Becky watched the place—drinking her second drink—wondering what time it was and worrying about her mother waiting up in the den, chain smoking and watching old movies on television.

She looked at Hank standing belly to belly with the woman in the red chemise, her head swaying back and forth, earrings catching a flash even in the dim light of the bar, her thighs meshed into Hank's. Shirley went up to the stage again, said something to Billy and he began an intro into her song.

-Here's an Eddy Duchin song for ya'all.

A guy walked up to the stage with a clarinet and began blowing a wailing, sad counterpart to her voice.

*What'll I do when you are far away*

*And I'm so blue what'll I do...*

Becky's eyes were closed when a huge hunk of a black man, looking like a prizefighter, leaped across the floor toward Hank and the ebony girl. The room continued in its swaying hypnotic blend, nothing ruffled or alarmed, but Becky's eyes shot open and saw Hank and Princess kissing. The big black man grabbed her arm; whipping her around so fast an earring fell onto the floor.

-Chamique, get yo ass on over here.

-Don you talk me that way, Early, I ain't don nothing. You made me lose my earring.

The big man shoved her toward the table.

-Sit down, Chamique.

She wrenched her arm loose from his grasp and bent down to pick up the earring. Early's hand caught her on the side of the head, sending her sprawling onto the floor. The room took notice but nothing stopped, as if they were used to this kind of thing. Becky saw the princess on the floor, fishing for her earring.

-I said, sit the fuck down, bitch, Early exploded above the noise of the bar.

Hank faced him, jaw to jaw.

-Now, where do you get off treating a lady like that?

-You mind yo bidness, white boy.

-This is my business.

-No, it ain't.

Becky looked around the room. Willy, his nervous little body jerking around, ran even faster from table to table, delivering drink orders from a little tray.

Shirley and the band kept playing.

Chamique stayed on the floor.

-Help me up, Early.

Becky saw the side of Chamique's face all smashed in from the blow, black mascara running down the side of her cheek.

-I'll hit you again if you don' get yo ass sit down, Early said, breathing heavily. He removed his jacket, revealing a pinstriped shirt and a dazzling red silk tie. Becky noticed he was dressed smartly, like a businessman, but he wore gold chains around his neck and a huge diamond ring graced the pinky finger of his left hand.

-I ain't about to bother wit you, Early said to Hank, you just a guttersnipe I kick away wit my foot. Hank looked tensed up and small next to Early, his frame got smaller the bigger Early's chest got.

-You throwin' the first punch, whitey? Go on ahead on—throw me one.

Early unbuttoned the two top buttons of his shirt, loosened his tie and thrust his enormous chest out, spreading his legs, in fight position. Hank squatted, turned and kicked out with his right leg. The kick glanced off the hard body like a rubber ball bouncing off a wall. Early laughed and looked around the room for confirmation, grabbed Hank by his shirt and threw a punch at his jaw, sending Hank onto the floor.

Shirley motioned for the band to quit.

-Now boys and girls, ladies and gents, let's keep it civil here at the Black and Tan. We here to have fun.

Becky couldn't move. It was too exciting, too riveting and too much. A Hemingway heroine would rush over to her man, she thought, and comfort him, wiping

his face, but she sat still, unable to make a move. Chamique got up from the floor and looked at Early, puffing her high, haughty breasts out at him.

-Now, why you you go do that, you big ass brute? He just a skinny, little white boy.

Early looked down at Hank.

-You want to take it out back, honky?

Billy got up from the piano and walked over to the mike.

-Nigger, shut the fuck up and let us blow!

-Yeah! Voices exploded from the room.

-Take it away somewhere else, Billy said and went back to the piano.

Willy walked over to Becky's table.

-Little girl, take your boy on outta here.

-I thought they liked him here.

-Yeah, well he done messed with the wrong woman.

Becky gathered the nerve to walk over to Hank, nursing his bruised and bloody face with Early's handkerchief.

-Hank, you gotta take me home.

Hank got up. Becky thought he looked weak and worn all messed up—nothing like the man she thought she knew. Early stood in front of them both, guarding his table and guarding Chamique, who sat in a corner of the booth, looking furious, rubbing her face and trying to put the earring back in her ear.

-I'll escort the man out the door, Early said.

Shirley came off the stage and walked over to Early.

-You causin' trouble, nigger? She looked at Hank. -You look a mess, young man. Take this little girl home and clean up yourself. We'll see you another day. And you— she stabbed Early in the chest with her fat hand, -you just sit down with your woman and stop being such a hard ass nigger.

Early's face softened, went all childish, humble and chastised; grabbed his jacket from the backside of the chair, hunched his shoulders and did as he was told.

Shirley took one glance at the sorry group: Chamique hunched over in the corner, Early protecting her with his enormous body like a giant tree shading a little flower, kissing her over and over, saying -Sorry baby, did I hurt you? Sorry baby, I'm so sorry, and she acting all miffed and successful and proud and self-righteous. Shirley glanced around the bar, then turned her eyes back to the group like a matriarch disciplining her brood of wayward children.

-Men and women. Thank God I'm through with all that- she spoke to the room. Laughter and a splatter of applause, then Billy playing a few comic chords on the piano ended her speech. She ambled back to the stage and looked at Billy who smiled at the crowd and gave the intro chords to a new song.

Hank took a last mournful look at Chamique and one short glance at Becky.

-Come on, I want to get out here, Becky ordered.

The ride home was dead silent, not even the radio. Hank's face looked a mess and she didn't want to kiss him. He left her at the corner a block from her house because her mother thought Cheryl was taking her out.

-Well—he managed a pathetic laugh, quite an evening, huh?

-I still love you, she said, bolting out of the car before he could say anything.

Sylvia was waiting up in the den, smoking and watching the window.

-Do you know what time it is, Becky?

-Yeah—I know—I'm sorry—I—Cheryl got—

-Wait till your father hears about this.

-What time is it?

-2:30 Becky. What were you doing?

-We were just messing around, Where's dad?

-He's at a business meeting.

-A business meeting at 2 in the morning?

-Go to your room, Becky.

Becky trudged up to her room and slammed the door, wondering about her father and his all-night business meetings. After what she saw at the bar, maybe he did things like that too. She wished he were home so she could talk about all that had gone on for her—how much she was changing.

The crisp, cool, ironed sheets felt like heaven on her warm skin—a sliver of moon shot a white light across the bedspread. The hot night air brought a breeze that cooled her from the open window next to her bed. She did not fully realize at that moment that music would always be her lover; those moments between the notes, the notes themselves, the way she lost herself in the fabric of chords and words and thoughts--all this made her sleep, gave her dreams, excited that innate feeling that wanting more was just another avenue of that larger panorama—the events of life a backdrop to the rhythm of dream. Hank was just a moment to get her to the beat.

## Boredom

Cheryl didn't call the next day. In fact, she didn't hear from Cheryl until August. July brought heat, brilliant flowers and boredom. She almost wished she had opted out for going to summer camp. Where was the summer romance she thought she'd embarked on? The ship of romance sailed without her, she concluded. She filled her time playing tennis with Beebe, tanning on the patio and walking barefoot in the house drinking iced tea laced with Vodka from her dad's liquor cabinet.

"How was tennis?" Her mother asked one hot afternoon, Becky sitting in the rocking chair in the den, spent, wasted, drinking her tea and staring at the blank television screen.

"Oh, it was great. She can't lobby and it was like playing with myself."

"Beebe's your cousin."

"I don't care. She can't play tennis."

"Well, someday she might surprise you."

"What—get a new personality?"

"I have a stock club meeting."

Sylvia stubbed the cigarette into the ashtray and walked out of the room. Becky felt all the energy of the day drain out of her. Why doesn't he call? Don't you care about me, Hank?

She went into the library and put on Chris Connor.

*Where are you?*

*When we said goodbye love, what had we to gain?*

*When I gave you my love—*

*Was it all in vain?*

Her father noticed the blue mood in Becky and decided to send her and Wendy to Mackinac Island for a long weekend.

“They’ll have dancing, and beach parties and live music. It’ll be fun. Aubrey Ettenheimer has a cabin on the beach—you two can stay there.”

“Great,” Becky said, without much enthusiasm. Her father always had wonderful plans and such a great sense of adventure—he just didn’t understand the feelings of a girl in love.

Wendy looked nothing like her younger sister. With her dark curls and fair, freckled skin, she had her mother’s coloring. Francis had helped arrange a job for her as a senate intern in Washington D.C. for the summer through friends of his when he worked in the Pentagon during the war. Wendy was exceedingly reluctant to fly back and spend a weekend with Becky at Mackinac, feeling as if she had been coerced to help Becky nurse some problem she had no interest in; broken hearts not being her area of expertise, but she never defied her father as Becky often did. Becky did not ponder how her father knew she needed respite from this so-called broken heart; they never talked about it, but Francis did. He knew.

The cabin owned by the Ettenheimers was small, sparsely furnished, with just two single cots and a dresser. They ate out on the island, took the buggy ride around and sat on the beach. In the evening some diabolical jazz-fusion group played awful imitations of Beatles tunes. Both of the girls were bored, but they didn’t want to admit it.

“What’s it like in Washington?” Becky asked Wendy as they lay on their beach towels. They had just come from a swim and the water on their skin, mixed with tanning lotion, evaporated in the hot, sizzling moment of sun. Wendy always worried about her fair, freckling skin and wore a T-shirt over her suit and a wide-brimmed straw hat.

“I don’t know,” Wendy told her. “Aren’t you worried about burning?”

“No. I’ll burn and get a good layer and then I’ll tan. So tell me what it’s like.”

“I don’t know. It’s fine. We run around a lot. You have to wear a suit everyday and its hotter there than here.”

“Hotter than here?”

“Yeah.”

“But Washington D.C.—the President and everything.”

“There are war protestors hanging around the Capitol all the time.”

“Well—they ought to protest. The war is wrong.”

“I won’t discuss this with you, Becky.”

“Why not?”

Wendy did not answer.

“Have you seen the President?”

“He came and met all the aides at a luncheon one day when we first got there.”

“Wow.”

“He shook all our hands.”

“Didn’t you just get all weak like jelly?”

“No. He seemed distant.”

Becky tried to imagine John Kennedy up close.

“Is he handsome?”

“Yes. He looks tired.”

Wendy got up.

“I have to go in, this is too much sun for me.”

She walked toward the little beachside restaurant where they ate their meals, leaving Becky to bake in the sun. A few days later Wendy flew back to D.C. from the little airport in Traverse City and their father picked Becky up to drive her back home.

“How was Mackinac Island?” Francis asked her as they left the island.

“Ok. Thanks, dad, for sending us.”

“You’re welcome. I hope it made your summer better.”

“Oh, yeah, it did.”

“You know, I used to play in a band up here when I was in College. Alto Sax and Clarinet.”

Becky nodded. She’d heard this story many times before.

“We played at the Grande Hotel. Big Band stuff: Dorsey, Glenn Miller. The place was always crowded—people danced slow in those days.”

“They still do.”

He glanced at her as they entered the ramp onto the highway.

“We made some good music you know.”

“Old fashioned jazz,” she said.

“Jazz is jazz. You gotta start somewhere.”

Back at home things in the house buzzed as her mother put the summer clothes away and got the winter stuff out of the cedar closet. Everything smelled of cedar and mothballs. Summer was winding down, Becky noticed; the nights got cooler and she felt fall and school inching closer. Being a sophomore in High School excited her—she'd no longer be a baby in the pack. She looked forward to meeting with the Canto group and discussing literature for a change. Raymond, the gardener her mother hired from Michigan State, came to trim the bushes and the branches of the cherry blossom tree. He cut the grass shorter than he did in summer—to “give it room to breath” he told her mother. Raymond, in tune with the minute transitions of seasons, was already thinking of getting everything in the yard ready for fall.

Becky stood under the giant oak tree in front of the house, feeling like a child again, looking up into the branches, wondering what sort of someone stood there two hundred years ago. Down the street children played on the sidewalk with their bikes and wagons, just as she used to do. Summer over; she felt glad. Fall was always her favorite season anyway. School was going to be great this year—she could feel it.

Her mother gave her some money to buy school supplies and she took the bus downtown to wander around, have a coke at Kreges' soda fountain; get some notebooks and pens. She went into Maurice's to check out the junior section and made mental notes of the clothes she wanted her mother to buy her for school. It was time to move out of the cute stuff and into things more grown up. In the misses section she saw a V-neck black dress she knew her mother would never buy her and made a decision to buy it on her own and not tell her mother.

She enjoyed hanging out downtown, watching the weird mixture of people from the state senators and business people to the bag ladies to the young punks hanging around, with their narrowed eyes and ugly clothes. In January she'd be sixteen and her father said he'd give her a Sweet 16 party. She figured she was done cruising the gut and anyway the city council decided to make Capitol Avenue into a boulevard to stop the kids from tearing everything up.

A week before school started Cheryl called.

"I'm not going back to school."

"What?"

"My mom is moving in with this guy and I'm going to go live with my Aunt Carol in Indianapolis."

"Indianapolis?" Becky tried to imagine what that town was like. "Is it anything like Lansing?"

"Not hardly. Indianapolis is a big city. Lansing is a piss-pot little shit of a town."

Hank, the subject that hung between them, created an open cave of unspoken words. Becky resisted moving into the edgy space of it.

"Well. I guess I got to find someone else to give me a ride to school."

"Yeah. I guess you do. I've got to sell my car anyway."

"Why?"

"'Cause my aunt doesn't want me to drive a car in town—the traffic and all—and I need the money."

"Isn't your aunt gonna support you?"

“Shit—my mom is gonna give her a little money, but Carol’s unemployed. She’s got a baby from some guy and she’s on welfare.”

This was a world Becky knew nothing about.

“You call her Carol?”

“She’s only six years older than me.”

“Oh.”

“So—what does she do?”

“Take care of the baby, I guess. And now me.

“What about your dad?”

“Oh, fuck him.” Becky could hear the sound of Cheryl lighting up a cigarette.

“Well—I’ll miss you.”

“So—you ready for school?” Cheryl, not much for sentiment, ignored this.

“Oh yeah—my mom’s taking me shopping at Maurice’s. I already got most of my school supplies.”

“That’s nice,” Cheryl said, her voice sad. “I wish I could do that. I wish I had your life.”

“Yeah. It’s ok.”

“So—“ the silence left no room for escape. “Have you heard from Hank?” Cheryl teased.

“No, have you?”

“Yeah. He’s in the hospital again.”

“Oh.”

“I wouldn’t count on hearing from him again, Becky.”

“Well—I want to go see him.”

“ You can’t.”

“Is he at St. Lawrence?”

“He’s in a different place—somewhere near Hillsdale. He’s going to be there for a while. Becky--”

“Why can’t I see him?”

“Look—I don’t want to hurt you, but he said to tell you not to come see him.”

“He did? He said that? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“You don’t even have a phone number?”

“Becky—you need to just forget about Hank.”

There was silence on the phone between the girls. Becky’s throat felt tight and choked. She looked out her bedroom window watching Raymond rake the new mown tips of green grass—the smell of new cut grass drifted in from the window.

“Oh, listen—my mom’s calling me. Have fun in Indianapolis.”

“Thanks. Look, maybe--“

Becky hung up before Cheryl completed the sentence. Her mother was gone from the house and she didn’t want to talk to Cheryl one minute longer. The only peace she could find now was to wander down to the living room and put her hands on the yellowed ivory keys of the Gulbranson piano her grandmother had brought from Russia. She felt the familiar mixture of joy and sorrow as her hands glided over the keys and she sang a song she’d just learned from her Chet Baker album, *Some folks were meant to live in clover, but they are such a chosen few, and clover being green, it’s something I’ve never*

*seen, cause I was born to be blue.* Bored with her own self, she went into the library and put on an old 78 Alberta had given many years before. It was of the Willing Workers.

*Do Lord, Do Lord, do you remember me*

*Way beyond the blue.*

**To Be Continued**