

The Night They Burned Sacco and Vanzetti

by

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Book I

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1: Vasto, 1887

Giulia Camerini heard the bell downstairs in the great hall of the Charity Association of Vasto, known to all as simply ‘The Orphanage,’ and notable as once a palazzo of the ruling d’Avalos family.

It was a cold January day beautifully clear and sunny, but cold and a bit windy so there was no time to be wasted in getting downstairs to check the compartment of the big wooden wheel built into the exterior wall of the building on Via Aimone. Her heart was sure to race upon hearing that bell. What order of sweet little *bimba* awaits in the wheel’s compartment lined with woolen blanket?

But it was not a sense of surprise. It was, rather, her conditioned excitement having heard the tinkle echo in the great hall many times throughout the years. No, she was not surprised for she had been seeing a young girl, of perhaps sixteen, on the streets and in the marketplace for at least six months now.

Giulia brings up her mental records—Yes; she first appeared back in early August. She is always on the lookout for the young faces that appear in Vasto and act as if on their own—on their own unable to conceal their constant expression of worry. There are always a few of these poor children each year whom Giulia must take under her wing. The rest of the unwed young mothers-to-be are local girls or from a nearby *borgo*; and they become conspicuous over time by their absence from school, and church, for no apparent reason.

But this girl; this girl that she has had her eye on has been looking very swollen and ready to give birth for over a week now. One of the town’s midwives has been funneling her information: The girl’s name is Angelica, and she is from a mountain village two days travel due west up in the high foothills of the Maiella, a little town known for its fine woolen fabrics called Taranta Peligna.

The bell bounced ringing one last time. It was a strong, concerned ring. She could feel the girl's worry for her baby in the cold box of the wheel. And she was more aware of the girl's inner struggle, her anguish, than anyone in the town, or its churches, could possibly be. For she has been working with these girls, crying with these girls, guiding these girls in their spiritual dilemma over the years as few others could possibly have.

—It rang, and she was sure the wheel had been turned. The baby would now be within the protective walls of the palazzo. She was also confident that the young mother was dashing away into the maze of twisted narrow streets and alleys.

How well Giulia knows these girls. After all, has she not been director of adoptions and holding and loving these babies for the last twenty-six years now! And yes, Angelica has indeed vanished into the medieval labyrinth of the town's center. She will undoubtedly make her way back to that little village. When the midwife asks the girl her surname, she gives: "Di Donato, daughter of Agostino." The wise midwife is a good judge of character and believes the girl is telling the truth: She is from the little mountain village and her mother is the cook to the owner of the town's largest woolen mill, Vincenzo Merlino.

Abundant water to power the machinery of the mills has made the town on the eastern slopes of the Apennines ideal for the industry. Springs gush from the outcroppings and fissures high above the town, bursting from brutal bare rock—tributaries rush on their way to the great Aventine to power looms in stone and brick buildings at rushing stream's edge.

Angelica's mother, Filomena, makes the walk up the terraced village lanes defying the mountain's steep inclines to the home of Don Merlino, *il padrone*, the undisputed *capo* of Taranta. She arrives each morning at 6 o'clock to fire the large cast-iron kitchen stove shipped all the way from Pescara. Vincent Merlino's fine home sits highest up the hillside within the village. But higher still, it is watched over from above by the parish church of San Nicola boldly placed with craggy mountain wall towering above as backdrop. And before entering by the kitchen door each morning Filomena

takes a moment to look up at the wonderful fortress-like *campanile*—bell tower, of her Chiesa di San Nicola, thank the Holy Mother, and make the sign of the cross. With this, her heart would normally be at peace with the blessing of a new day's work.

But something has been weighing greatly on her mind. In recent days she has been addressing a special prayer to San Nicola asking him to watch over her teenage girl, Angelica, with his well-known compassion. She calls on San Nicola as the 'protector of children,' for she is deeply worried that her own daughter is just such a child in need.

Angelica moves through her chores in the Merlino kitchen as in a dream. And Sister Gesuina told Filomena, after mass on the steps last Sunday, that the girl is unable to pay attention to her lessons at school and "wears a constant mask of worry," over what is normally her serene, child-like face. Filomena remembers her own stubborn mind at fifteen and knows that questioning her daughter will only drive her deeper into secrecy.

Her ancient intuition, though, has already given her the answer—told her the truth. She knows in her heart that it is the result of the famous poet's visit to their town some three months ago. She felt him a strange man. He did not arrive in a coach of any fashion, nor in a small buggy he would have driven himself. He arrived on horseback outfitted as if rogue scout who had abandoned the military and adopted the dangerous call of the Maiella range he set out to explore, reverting to predator beast, as if the mountain itself had cast the sign of the evil eye on the gnomish little man.

Word had spread quickly amongst the women the very first day he arrived: He must enter the *Grotto of the Cavallone*, he was heard exclaiming to the mayor in a boastful manner; that it was a marvel of God's imagination in karst and that who better than he to enter such pooled and mysterious place—"the Womb of Mother Nature herself!"

"I must experience the grotto firsthand," he said, "I have an idea for a play in mind which would utilize the caves as a key theatrical setting—a scene of fatal struggle between father and son—very dramatic, very primal. . .

“For my research I must fully realize the wonders of my Maiella. I must drink in the body of her verdant hillsides on powerful stallion. One must sleep out in the wilds under naked outcropping and awaken before dawn so as to behold her deep golden-rayed penetration—rising, higher, still higher, until ecstatic climax emblazoned with the Abruzzese sun of *mezzogiorno!*”

The women told of how the visitor behaved as if delivering oration on a grand stage before an audience. No one in the little town had ever seen a man speak in such manner.

Even upon his arrival Filomena intuited strong messages of foreboding. The poet was to stay at the home of her employer and master of the mills, Vincenzo Merlino. It had been arranged months earlier by the mayor after receiving D’Annunzio’s first communiques. She must bite her tongue. The honored guest, the Prince of Montenovoso di Pescara, must not be criticized or be victim of superstitious rumors originating from her kitchen. As an extra precaution she performed the reading of the tea leaves; this, just one of the many mountain rituals recalled from a past so distant no one can say for sure whence it came; far preceding the Church of Rome, the Apostles, or any one religious influence.

Gabriele D’Annunzio’s true reason for exploring these hills was largely hidden, perhaps even to himself. For he carried within a certain need not fully defined, a great curiosity. He could feel the residual reverberations of an entire people’s fantastic—even supernatural—ritual of life rooted in these untamable slopes and high pastures.

Yes, he was of Abruzzi, but from the cosmopolitan center of Pescara. What remains safeguarded in these mountains long since decayed in his civilized city. But here, high in the Apennines isolating its people from the rest of the world, *this* is where he must seek it, those bone-chilling secrets of the awesome *Fattura*—that shadowy region of the cabbala from whence emanated prophecy, healing, protection from evil spirits, the influencing of love and hate, communion with the dead—and, *il malocchio*—the evil eye, with its cast spells and curses.

Cloaked in conjecture and passed on from generation to generation often its meaning could only be understood through symbolism. For the symbolic

remains true to its origins, unadulterated, no matter how many generations have passed from living, laughing, loving and hating to distant dead voices moldering in stone crypts.

In these hills you will hear the very old comfort each other. You will also hear of their instruction of the young by revealing the secret power of *the older time*: Habits of primitive peoples forever passed away, persist here—Rites long dead and forgotten elsewhere, survive here—Unexplainable signs and symbols long extinct, remain alive here. “Are we not the sole keepers of the *Fattura*?”

Filomena is prepared to safeguard her family by affixing a wax cross to one side of the doorjamb to prevent the entering of evil spirits; but more imminently, the reading of the tea leaves has delivered a confirmation: danger has arrived.

She steps outside the kitchen door, looks up at her Church of San Nicola and makes the sign of the cross, resolving to pray as she has never prayed before; beseeching San Nicola, and the Holy Mother, that they might protect her Angelica.

2: We meet Aleck.

“That Di Donato boy . . . You heard about the filthy magazine, I take it. What kind of parents—I ask you,” says Sally Owens’ mother, ringleader of the Godly crusade in their little town.

“It’s the father. That’s where he gets it,” replies Becky Penner’s mother.

How they love to whisper about that kid. Well, it’s a small community still so it’s to be expected. And it will stay this way, small, insular, until the big day when the governor comes all the way out on the Island to break ground on the new State University in another few years.

“Paul Di Donato. That man. He’s simply a disgrace! And that son of his is following right in his footsteps—no good, simply no good!” say the mothers of the other kids at Setauket School (Setauket being an authentic Indian name of the Algonquin Nation.)

“And what’s more, how is it exactly the boy is in our school in the first place? You know of course they live out in Mount Sinai. I’d like to know why he’s not in their school out there where he belongs, and I plan on getting to the bottom of it. Yes I certainly do! . . . Why, I hear the mother and Paul Gelinis are quite good friends, so I hear . . .”

Apparently, the straw that broke the camel’s back was just days earlier. Aleck brought a copy of Nugget magazine into class with him. He felt very special. The editors had sent his father an exclusive advance copy. Everyone was excited when it arrived in the mailbox; but Aleck was beside himself. It contained his dad’s latest steamy fiction about a showgirl, Dottie Jackson, who contracted syphilis and passed it on to the big mafia boss, Big Tony. It also contained a color centerfold the boys in his class drew a bead on right off. Aleck, though, practically oblivious to the photos, gushed on proudly about his father’s latest published work and the fact that the critics in New York thought that his father was a great prose writer, a word none of the other kids knew much about. He performed for his sixth-grade classmates with great theatrics and animation out on the playground behind home plate:

“—So at the end Big Tony dies of syphilis cause these little spirochetes like little worms eat holes in your brain and he’s on the slab and they’re doing an autopsy! They cut you wide open and pull out all your guts and the

doctor's sawing the top of his head off with like a hacksaw and he's got this pretty young girl in a white coat, his assistant, and she's wearing this perfume and Big Tony's head is clopping from side to side on the slab and all the doctor can think about is the pretty girl's perfume cause it's driving him crazy!"

Little Sally Owens saw the whole affair out with two or three of her friends, also listening on. Sally worked herself up into crocodile tears, claiming that it scared her. Mrs. Schooley called Aleck inside. They walked down the hall in silence and entered the empty classroom. She sat down behind her desk. He could hear the other kids out on the beautiful grounds in the sunshine and the shouts and yells of the softball game going on. A feeling swept over him before she even said a word. It was a mix, a brew of shame, resentment, pride, defiance and anger. He knew he was being singled out—and it was not right. He couldn't make order of it. But somewhere deep in his psyche he had made a decision even before Mrs. Schooley had ceremoniously sat down: His uncanny ability to not only survive, but to prevail via vindication was spontaneously called to action.

He buttressed his own rationale for the audacious Show and Tell he was performing out on the playground. Why wouldn't all at school be thrilled to see right there in print, and with wonderful artwork too!—his father's, the famous author's, latest splashy fame?

He endured the humiliation. He threw up a sophisticated mix of intent listening, acknowledging—charming, while running a disdainful sub-strain of dismissal behind the already well-polished mask used for just such occasions. Mrs. Schooley, frustrated, furious, went to the principle, Paul Gelinias.

Therefore, you see it's the mothers, for the most part; the mothers are the first to the ramparts fiercely defending their kids from the influences of "that family," the Di Donatos.

Because, well, amongst other things, Di Donato isn't exactly an American name. Not the kind that goes way back to the days of America's fight for independence from the Crown and the Forefathers of their blessed little hamlet far out on the North Shore of Long Island, some sixty-five miles or so east of York City.

And the boy, Aleck? He doesn't bother giving it much thought—not now at least. The cold-hearted gossip won't get to him for a while still. For now

he's too busy living every new and thrilling day. That doesn't mean however that he isn't aware of a certain, something. He is. It's just that it all comes to him as naturally as if it were the salty seaweed smells of the vast Sound with its metal-gray skies and its stalled summer swelterings.

But maybe that was what bothered people, some people—the naturalness. And when his big sister (whom he most certainly worshiped) seemed to gather up all those feelings in the town and, for what seemed like no reason at all, instantaneously turn on him cruelly berating him for how self-centered and conceited he was; how someday he would regret not paying attention in class and taking everything for granted and doing whatever he felt like doing whenever he felt like doing it—not at all like the other boys and girls at Setauket School—telling him how he was most assuredly heading for a very rude awakening someday. He wasn't sure exactly why. But the almost savage anger in her voice and the glaring in her sky-blue eyes certainly troubled his young mind.

3. We meet the father.

If you were to ask one of the locals in Port Jeff to describe Paul Di Donato, they'd probably say that he was about six-foot tall, athletic, lean—dark hair and eyes; that he walked with a jaunty bounce in his step that matched his outgoing personality. And they'd definitely tell you about how he likes to stop and chat: "All you have to do is catch his eye," they'd say, and tell you how you'd end up in a ten-minute conversation in the produce section of Bohack's. He'd probably go on about the way he prepares his eggplant, or rabe—Or especially if you ran into him on the back street. Oh yes, especially on the back street along with his friend Johnny Baptista. . . And if you asked one of the erudite radicals, the art crowd, his friends on the backstreet, they'd tell you about his brilliant mind and his Greek god bust of a profile with that distinctive, intelligent high forehead of his—how that famous black-and-white shot of his profile distinguished him from all the other writers of the day.

Most all in town who knew him were proud to have their very own home-grown celebrity (Port Jefferson was natives, down-to-earth working folks—unlike Setauket. Setauket was where the airline captains and nuclear physicists all lived) right there on the sidewalks and in the stationary store and Eikov's Liquors where he bought his jug wine. —And oh yes, certainly in front of the icy display case at Brown's Fish Market.

But in reality, he wasn't six foot; he was just five-foot eight; and he wasn't an athlete (although he certainly had been in his pure and youthful Northport days backstroking across the harbor), he just moved like one. His whole presence had a precision of balance unlike anyone else and people sensed it. He had been slinging twenty-five-pound block into place in wet mortar five, ten—twenty-five stories up since a teenager. He had the combined grace and strength of a fine-tuned athlete and Met ballet star combined. It was something he took for granted, though.

Maybe nationally, in the national press, he would be called: The Forgotten Author. But here in Port Jefferson he was still someone special; and he

worked at keeping that image alive with the skill of a Madison Avenue executive. —For in his mind the big comeback was right around the corner—that big phone call from his agent, or an editor, of a movie executive or director—that one phone call that would ring in the downstairs hall any day now and change everything. And why not? It had happened once before in his life. It was just a matter of time . . . and a bit of luck . . . And this time, when he was back on top again, he promised himself, promised, he'd get it right—No more booze and swell dames, no more immature displays throwing cash around at swanky clubs and restaurants and shiny new convertibles. But most of all, not a cent wasted on his idiot brothers, the boys he had raised and fed and clothed and spoiled since they were kids—He resented it, all of it, bitterly.

And while his son Aleck, named for his mother's father, Lt. Alexander Richard Dean, is placing his devoted trust in his father, believing him infallible (Although, yes, of course he realizes his father has his problems. But don't all great artists?), the infallible father is struggling to write that hit book he so desperately needs.

And yes, of course it's about the money. It was always about the money. But there's a far deeper force in play here; a far deeper need than even the money or fame. For you see, it was the only way he knew, to . . . His only path to purification. Because . . . he *was* pure. He's sure of it. Well, at least he had been. And in *his* book there's no halfway, no in-betweens. But if he could come clean in his art (for in his mind art was a transcendence which carried a kind of holy reverence), a writer's confessional, if you like, and bare his Soul—

After all, his mother was pure when she married her childhood sweetheart, Geremio, back in the old country, in Vasto. She was pure on her wedding night; there was no doubt about that. Each of the eight children had been conceived and born in the light of His Love and Purity. The question of why he alone should be exempt—un-needing of the same, wrangled endlessly in his mind. Simple. It was much easier to go the path of pleasure, to turn away from the years of his mother's loving inculcations: her

daily catechisms; holy cards; scapula; and nightly prayers bedside on their knees. It was inevitable that he'd be asking himself someday if she had been right all along—Of course she had, he admitted to himself during occasional flashes of candor.

But he doubted his writing at times, mocking his own belief that his “scribblings,” would somehow bring about a kind of absolution, the cleansing he was so desperate for.

What's the answer. . .? Well, the only thing you *can* do. Write. Rewrite the history you fucked-up so badly—Will Eternity. And while you're at it you might as well tell them about all that wonderful fame and fun . . . The fame. God knows, there's nothing like it. You look like a fool having been famous and rich and now back on the scaffolds breaking your ass like a goddamned animal.

His mind swirls with anxious thoughts, a bad mix of revenge and a pathetic craving for the straight path he strayed from so many years earlier.

The only way . . . The only way. But for what? Be honest . . . What you really want is His forgiveness; whom you simply lost faith in.

Yes yes, you renounced him decades ago. But. Still. There are . . . things. Oh, not the stupidity, like being blind drunk down at the marina and having that gang of flag-waving yachtsmen knock you and Pete Petri around and throw you off the end of the dock at midnight, laughing and mocking. Or even for getting lit every night at dinnertime and dragging your Kathleen by the hair through hell. Why? Because she was a widow. That filthy word. Because she had had the gall to marry some other man, the corpulent old Dutchman, the hotel manager, the soft-handed one, before she was even aware of you, the hotshot young author. No. Not for the obvious reasons—

4: Paul's writing room, 1969.

Closing the door behind him in the upstairs spare bedroom—once Harriett's room, now his writing room—he settles in and flips on the motor of his salmon-pink Selectric. The smooth hum signals the beginning of creation and he begins batting out some lines that have been floating around in his head for the last day or two.

And once the miraculous ball (and miraculous it is; the twelve-year-old in him is as impressed by that ball as one of those deep-Congo cannibals witnessing the supernatural powers of the white-man's carbine for the first time) slaps the bonded Sphinx typing paper with those inky characters, so clean, so precise, his thoughts transform, genie like, becoming reality he controls from his fingertips: *The regrets of our past, as time goes by, weigh as an anchor chained to the heart day by day dragging down—Imperceptibly heavier—Down to cold darkness. Down to that inevitable black oblivion. . .*

He likes it well enough. Not bad not bad, he tells himself. He happened to have thumbed through some Conrad the other day. But it wasn't that. He'd already found himself writing these types of lines these days.

He stares down at the sheet with the latest incarnation of his attempt to reorder time. Reading it over several times he isn't sure if he truly believes what at first he had thought to be so true. —Maybe goddammit he isn't ready to succumb to those regrets. Maybe he would defy the way of things—of life, and refuse to play The Penitent . . . save all that crap for your deathbed—which, by the way, maybe, just maybe there's a way around . . . For Christ sake. Do you really believe you're going to be the first exception? —*Couldst thou make men to live eternally, Or, being dead, raise them to life again?*

Wishful thinkers like you have been scheming since God-knows how far back in sheer disbelief that 'the show goes on' once you become nothingness. Just another death-obsessed author. Pretty boring stuff. And as we all know, in the writing game boring is the Kiss of Death.

—Well, if he is destined to join everyone else in that cold oblivion, Mahler's Ultimate Destination (And let's be honest; for some comforting reason you find it a bit easier to face knowing that every single somebody else in the world faces the same shitty end. And no exceptions! Not mother. And certainly not father. Not the faceless every-man in the street or the president of the U-nited States of America—not even the Pope!), it wouldn't be before he had reaped his sweet revenge on all the sonsofbitches. And that goes double for the egghead critics in the City who had him washed up and ruled out—effete pricks. Sure. All of them.

And you know what the locals say behind your back—some of them at least, the reactionary shitheads: “Isn't that the guy who wrote that famous book, *We Build in Babylon* or something? Sure. That's him. Paul Di Donato. He wound up broke. Now he's laying bricks at Stony Brook. Better to never taste the good life in the first place, I say . . . On top of that, I hear they call him 'Paul the Red.'”

5: Couldn't stay Upstate.

There weren't many of the original old-timers around anymore in Port Jeff, the ones who had branded him back at the end of the war: He was the fancy writer who sat it out while the rest, their brave boys and husbands, their sweethearts and brothers, were laying down their lives overseas defending America. That's right. He had retreated to the grassy dunes of the North Shore while the war was still on. He wanted seclusion. They certainly could have stayed Upstate in New Ionia, where they met, now that he could afford to live anywhere he liked. New Ionia would have been a fine place to settle down, if, they hadn't met. But they had. And it was that one twist of fate, that unalterable cast of the die, that made it out of the question. For the mere mention of the name New Ionia, as in the New Ionia Hotel and its bloated old manager, Harry Mull, triggered his implacable rage. No, Upstate would never do; he would return to the familiar pull of the boroughs, taking his new wife with him.

Kathleen was open and pliable, going along with what he wanted. She even managed to overlook (well, it was all very new at the time) the mortifying embarrassment of the public scenes: in taverns; and restaurants; or train stations when men would back him into a corner or tail him speaking loudly and threateningly, calling him a dirty CO bastard—a traitor—the lowest of the low and barely letting him escape without getting the hell beaten out of him.

So they looked farther and farther out. Then they found her. Kathleen called her their “guiding angel”—in the tiny village of Stony Brook, roadside on 25A in her shed office opposite the railroad station. The sign on the front of the tiny building beneath the gooseneck lamp with green rusted enamel shade read:

AMY ELZON
—REALTOR—

No sooner than they had introduced themselves than she told them with a charming little smile: “I’ve been saving *just* the place for you. I’m not going to say another word about it. I want it to be a real surprise—other than you’re going to fall in love the moment you set eyes on it.”

And Amy was so right. She drove them up through Port Station and out country roads that ran through lush undulating terrain dispersed with sunny open fields and orchards, then descended the North Shore’s steep hills to a hamlet hidden away on the water.

She found the opening to the dirt drive almost consumed by the woods and rounded curves through the turning leaves of October until the bleached gray farmhouse opened into view. Paul looked to Kathleen. She was glowing. “Wonderful! Amy,” he had said back then, “We’ve found our new home. . .”

Strange, because the grayed old place—its clapboard beaten through the twenties, thirties and forties by the unsheltered buffeting of the Sound and baking beachside summers—wasn’t the kind of place Kathleen was accustomed to. However, like her new husband she was drawn to the hidden acres *with their own beach* and the magnetic water.

Giving the stalwart two-and-a-half story structure a quick look, Paul led her around to the backyard with its quiet transition to dune grass and the white sand beach rich with satiny-smooth colored stones: all shades of tan; white; dark glassy gray and various shades of rosy-pink quartz—and wanting to be immersed in such beauty and feeling the sun-warmed breeze on her cheeks her soul was moved deeply. She was the strangest of enigmas. There was no explaining her. Her upbringing (Chicago’s upper-crust neighborhoods with a black nanny and cook) could never have accounted for such a worship of the mysteries of nature—except that she had always adored when her Grandpa Williamson read to her from one of his Wordsworth volumes—And was she not of the age of Jack-in-the-pulpits and dragonflies, of garland-streaming nymphs dancing in moonlit meadows? Yes. And he already knew of her very private little-girl stories she wrote with her fountain pen to her father freshly, and gallantly, fallen in the night sky over France when his biplane struck telegraph wires in heavy fog at night.

Why did little girls with broken hearts resort to fantasies receding into shadowed woods living amongst the animals in a thatched-roof cottage, he wondered to himself that first night in the Tap Room of the New Ionia Hotel. That night was just like any other in a swell hotel full of opportunities to pick up beautiful girls now that he was a celebrity. It could have been any city on one of his book tours; New Ionia meant nothing to him.

She poured her heart out to him. Just him? She must have told the same secret thoughts to the dead manager. The thought left him with the ground shifting under his feet. He couldn't catch up with the jealousy which sprang instantly from nowhere. It shocked him. He would have felt more secure twenty stories above the teaming traffic slinging cement block and slippery wet mortar.

After all, this love was something new to him, the guinea kid from Jersey's Hoboken—a truly American girl, a white girl he could call his own yet not fully grasp and, despite his intuitive warnings, could not give up.

He was entranced, bewitched by those deep stirrings of hers, her creamy white skin and auburn hair. How she loved to gush forth feelings inspired by brave chickadees and gentle furry creatures, the mysteries of that other world below the surface and the wind rustling the treetops. She knew it was something more than just wind. And in her mind, it justified her existence—even more, made sense of her will to go on, giving her an indomitable spirit. “Can't you just feel it, darling? —the pervasive beauty of it all,” is what she had said to him upon first standing by the Sound that day. “It's my secret . . . You'll see. Someday.”

Yes, it was so beautifully revealing of whom she was. And although Paul thought he was drawn solely by his lust of the flesh (yes it was that, of course, because that's all it had ever been, copying his whoremaster father and recklessly dashing his mother's Old-World guidance of chastity and purity.) But there was something else too, something about the intimacy, the heartbreaking sincerity of her thoughts expressed in her rich contralto voice

and smelling the dark richness of her auburn hair, which drove his obsession.

She could *never* have laid her life out so unabashedly, so fearlessly, before any other man. No! You don't believe that for a second—you can't! And even in those early days when you walked at the water's edge and she was composing her innocent poetry, it mingled within that unreachable world of hers. . .

*There is a certain place
where I must go
to dwell and know
there to linger.*

*A place of Wind and Tide
of Marsh grass tall
where Bird and Fish
and Fowl may feed.
Small creatures scurry
finding haven for a nest
in this quiet place
so kindly blest.*

*This certain place is where
no earthly feet have trod
and where
if you are very still
you may hear
the gentle breath of God.*

6: The Island forms.

Paul had knowledge of the events that had shaped this place; and on occasion would slip into one of his characters and perform for his family as if on a great London stage:

“Ours is the result of stupendous forces—” (*Sweeping extended arm across panorama.*) “—unfathomable to the mind of man. Ought not we cherish our Blessed Home? Yes! I say. This earth of majesty. This seat of Mars. This other Eden, demi-paradise. . . This fortress built by nature for herself—” (*Picking up pace with dramatic intensity; voice modulating high, then dropping low and guttural for dramatic effect.*)

“—against infection and the hand of war—Against the envy of less-happier lands—” (*Pauses, emotionally reflecting.*) “—This blessed plot—This earth—This realm. This! . . . Mount Sinai . . .”

The kids loved his performances, jumping up and down, hugging his legs and clamoring for more, more! The two boys, that is. The older child, his stepdaughter, Harriett, rarely joined in; and even then, somehow did so on her strangely own terms. The strangeness of a strange child.

But as silly as his carryings-on were, it was true. Only a handful millennia ago—during the last great ice epoch of the Northern Hemisphere—the leading edge of the towering sheet (as tall as a thousand feet in some places) ground to a momentous, gouging halt creating the basin of what they now call “Long Island Sound.” Here was the future beachside setting of their roomy old farmhouse with its dormered hip roof and Mount Sinai’s hidden little harbor next door.

The stalled monolith was melting. It carried with it a great drift of rubble; and now its huge cargo was being dropped off, grain by grain, boulder by boulder and every conceivable size rock, stone and piece of gravel in-between. These moraine makings of the Island—scraped, chipped, rumbled and popped off sedimentary layers fused to bedrock harkening from

the cooling molten primordial below—were pushed south with its final dying gouge out into the ocean some twenty miles, someday a practical distance for the coal-fired ferries to cross back and forth to Bridgeport on their daily runs.

The scooped basin filled with seawater melding with the open ocean at its east end. The basin was now an arm of the Atlantic reaching all the way (the length of the new island it mirrored) to a narrow chunk of granite jutting above New York Harbor: a gargantuan deep shard of chipped arrowhead running north-south roughly thirteen miles and destined to be stolen from its inhabitants some twenty-two thousand years later, seeing as how these reaches deliver the dark heart of the white plunderer so conveniently to the FDR Drive.

But Mr. J. Pierpont Morgan Jr. goes one better. For him, a limousine drive from his Centre Island estate to his Manhattan office is too confining; so, in 1917 he has his steam commuter, the Navette, custom-built for him at the Herreshoff Shipyard. Built for both speed and comfort, the innovative design of her twin triple-expansion engines speeds him out of Oyster Bay and west some thirty miles or so, then, with a tact due south, down the East River to The Battery and his Wall Street office. What better way to commute than breakfasting in her sumptuous salon reading the papers and enjoying a cigar with his coffee?

The body of water he steamed through wasn't large enough to be called a sea, so it came to be known as a 'sound' by the early Dutch. It lapped the North Shore of the giant sandbar left behind by the forgotten ice sheet, while the South Shore. . . Well, the South Shore gazed directly out onto that infinite Atlantic Horizon under-washed by the faint glow of all that carefree queer fun to be had in the far-off Twentieth Century.

This Island, with the split tail on its East End and plunked off the coast of the continent, is as if created yesterday; and the writer Di Donato says that's just fine by him—his newly formed home just that much more removes him from the 450-million-year-old bedrock under his childhood tenement only

seventy-five miles west and up atop the Jersey Palisades. The seventy-five miles between those worlds might as well have been a million.

7: Meets Christ in front of Wally's fish market.

Behind the wheel with time to himself his thoughts drift. . . How clever that beauty, the Stony Brook professor Xin-Xing, in her handsome riding outfit; so precious porcelain-like, so . . . smart. Sex with erudition.

He's spoken to her twice now at Brown's Fish Market—her posing as some sort of parapsychic playing the role of Christ returned. What next! But in these times and in this once quiet little hamlet turned crazy college town, anything goes.

All that messiah stuff aside, what he's certain of is that she's one luscious looking China-doll piece of ass and imagines himself in the sweaty crotch of her gaberdine jodhpurs, bouncing—bouncing. . . And by the way, what's all this business about the "Yellow Hordes?" Why, her skin is the milkiest of milky, as though she would transform right back to the Godly ether whence she claims to have come, if, but a single ray of sunlight were to strike her velvety flesh . . . Still though, there *is* a translucent hue below the surface—right below the surface, but discernable nevertheless—of summery-yellow cream not detected in the Anglo, Hun, Nordic or Mediterranean.

He surprises himself. He hadn't figured on *The Girl of My Dreams*, like right off one of those corny phonograph records when he was a kid, turning out to be one of the ubiquitous-faced masses swarming the other side of the globe. (Oh, he readily admits it's *girls girls girls* alright, and always has been. Women are simply aged animals living out their days the same as any pissy sack of an old man: as Leonardo would say, "taking food in at one end and excreting it out at the other.") But sonofabitch, he notes, if this swell looking young Christ doesn't exude all the *Odoratus Sexualis* he desperately needs to reignite his profane madness. For no matter how many years slip by, his thoughts of fresh-dewed virginity, as if his Northport days had never become a thing of the distant past, were what seemed to sustain life. Well *in ogni caso*, it's a refreshing change at least.

But really. How likely is it that this Christ thing, so hotly kicked about these days—including Altizer's audacious question on the cover of *Time: Is*

God Dead?—should find itself being played out smackdab halfway out this jury-rigged island harborside right now, right here? In Port Jefferson!

And to top that (Has he gone mad?), actually weighing the possibility that Madame Xin-Xing Christ, coming out of the half-assed new university in Stony Brook next door, could indeed be the Real McCoy!—It was her disciples who started calling her Madame Christ, and they seem to have chosen the backstreet and especially Wally's place to spread the Good News of their unusual new messiah. It's where you see them in pairs on the sidewalk talking to the tourists off the ferry and handing out leaflets. But after all, wouldn't the big return occur at a historically significant site—someplace Classical, you know, Biblical?

Or, how about this: showing up in Rome making her entrance through the rarely used Jubilee Bronze Doors of St. Peter's? He likes to amuse himself with fantastic and absurd thoughts which were somehow redeemed in that they had the naivete' of a twelve-year-old: He pictured the Holy Father faced with a hot young piece—and a Ching-Chang China-girl to boot!—appearing amongst the tourists and faithful on pilgrimage making her way up to the Papal Alter beneath the Baldachin and standing her ground right before the Throne of Saint Peter as the undisputed (originally *Son*) of God returned—And why not! But. If in the US of A, wouldn't it be a big city where this most photogenic of Christs could grab the major headlines? But Stony Brook? Has anything good ever come out of Stony Brook?

Still, there was no denying that she has that nosey writer's curiosity of his all aglow. Those who know him have always understood him: Paul Di Donato has an insatiable curiosity that sets him apart. He's special. His great ability is to create something where others see nothing. *L'arte di arrangiarsi*. To pull on a loose thread until he retrieved a story. It's simply the way he is. And no doubt some resent him for being so confident, for having such a sure path, such an unquestioned purpose in life.

So it's perfectly natural that for him the great beauty—who only a few years earlier would have been an unimaginably alien face in the shops of the Three Villages—is irresistible. These days, his credo is: "Brother can you top this?"—and he has a feeling this story he's on to just might be the one.

8: On to Wally Brown's.

But first things first. Today he's preoccupied with getting to the fish market. Italy's biggest movie star, Alberto Sordi, will be arriving to his house tomorrow, Saturday. His old friend in Rome, Carlo Mazarella, arranged the whole thing and is bringing Sordi out to the Mount Sinai house from the City where Sodi is shooting. Carlo is the newscaster with the suave voice known over there as "*signor Televisione*."

Paul needs the freshest picks Wally has on ice for the occasion; and in addition, by the time they arrive tomorrow he'll have been down to the harbor flats to catch the 7:03 a.m. low tide—according to the tide calendar from Bryant Fuel Oil Service hanging on the kitchen wall—and have dug half a pail of littlenecks and cherrystones to make his famous white clam sauce.

And he can count on finding two or three nice fat conch for his *scungilli* appetizer: First, he steams the conch in its shell; then cools and pulls the rubbery meat, whole, in its prehistoric spiral shape; then chills and slices ready to be marinated in olive oil, salt, lemon juice and parsley from his garden.

Next course should be his dipped and skillet-fried *merloots*, the fish Americans call whiting. It takes a master to braise this *Abruzzese* favorite to its peak moment of perfection, its crispy thin skin and glassine white chunks unrivaled in their delicate aroma. The giant black-iron skillet in the Di Donato kitchen will churn out *merloots* to match any Sordi has ever eaten, even in the chicest of Rome's restaurants. And he's counting on Aleck, his younger boy, to run the kitchen.

It's not as though Aleck had his sights set on becoming a top chef, or the likes. It was more a matter of having been drafted into the job. His father never asked much of him. He never demanded that chores be done, or even that homework be paid attention to, or harped on about what time he rolled in on a school night.

But Aleck naturally wanted to please his father. He likes the feeling when he's made him happy, or proud. Being his mason's helper—loading brick, block, sand and eighty-pound cement bags onto the truck, mixing mortar in the encrusted steel mortar tubs and feeding brick up onto the scaffold—was something he wanted to do. He had wanted to do it as far back as he can remember. Better still: all the girls at Port Jeff High love his muscular body. One of the girls painting flats backstage was going on about it on the other side of a scrim.

And besides, it rationalizes in his mind that he earns the carefree life of art, theatre, girls and more fun than imaginable acted out in the huge backseat of his old Chrysler, or on the raged stuffed couch in the greenroom backstage.

So being conscripted to overseeing the lunch for the big Italian movie star and his small entourage was something he was looking forward to (it was all very exciting and international; and it was coming right into their kitchen there out in Mt. Saini.)

But paradise did have a storm cloud or two brewing on the horizon. His father was not at all pleased with his latest obsession—it threatened all: that glittering-fleck, candy-apple red Fender Bass he had recently brought back with him after living with his big sister at her little Palm Beach dream house on Eden Road, a block from the ocean and a few blocks from the Kennedy compound. (Harriett had convinced her mother, in a relentless series of phone calls, to let Aleck come down to live with her—and “Penny,” and attend Palm Beach High for his Junior year.)

Paul's heart sank at the sight of him carrying that guitar case when he got off the plane at Kennedy. His brilliantly talented son, the boy who was well on his way to becoming a famous actor—the hottest new Hollywood star—was now suddenly derailed by that “garbage,” that “moronic crap,” as his father called it.

Paul had groomed him for years on this heady high course—thoughtfully, steadily, with erudition and an uncanny sense of theatre. Aleck heard a daily sermon on art, the stage and the theatrical timing of drama, what constitutes

great acting and the creative mind, showbusiness and the world of the “celebrity”—how it miraculously raised you above the cesspool of the average slob—how people looked at you differently, treated you differently, bowing and scraping to fulfill your every wish—can’t do enough for you—“Oh, what an honor it is to have you with us, Mr. Di Donato, just tell us what we can do for you, Mr. Di Donato.” He assured him that when he was ready, once his invaluable experience in the City was under his belt, once he hit Hollywood, that he’d “knock them all out of the box”—the “punks and mutts,” including the big names—It was a sure thing. It was guaranteed!

And now this.

It’s a bitter, bitter disappointment that hounds Paul constantly these days—what’s more, it’s a disappointment that he refuses to accept.

9: Snaking through the woods.

The excitable Di Donato is on his high wire this Indian summer afternoon, with the big movie star and his dear friend Carlo coming out to the house and all, and he knows it. He welcomes the cool, meandering tar roads that snake their way through the woods of the North Shore. Pleasingly minimal, they are little more than dappled lumpy paths beneath the canopy of broad-leafed maples and gnarled-old wild cherry. The lay of the land appeals to him—never the same, undulating and sloping this way and that; the kettle-hole terrain rarely allows level ground to be found. One always has a sense of place relative to another, say, a stone’s throw away, or perhaps like today, Port Jefferson four miles due west if one were to draw a straight line along the shore from the Mount Sinai house to Port Jeff. (Actually, four miles would have you rounding Mount Misery to then tack hard-a-port into the channel lined with massive angular pieces of stone not familiar to Long Island—the jetty entrance of Port Jefferson Harbor. This would put you on the exact dotted course shown on the U.S. Coastguard map used by the captain of the Martha’s Vineyard in her twice daily eighteen-nautical-mile crossings to Bridgeport.)

Taking into account the ever-curving roads that were originally footpaths, later to be gouged by the invading white man from across the water, today’s drive is at least six miles to Port Station, or ‘Upper Port,’ and then down the hill to ‘Lower Port,’ the authentic village that had grown up over the last hundred-and-fifty years at the head of the natural harbor.

His thoughts drift on with the curves through the woods: He can’t get over that visit to Johnny Battista’s office. What the hell was that? For the life of him he can’t begin to come up with an explanation. (Johnny is his one true *paesan* in town and one of the regulars dropping by Brown’s Fish Market for tea and conversation; and importantly, in Paul’s mind, a guy who cherishes the memories of his grandparents and everything authentic of the Old World they had carried with them. He even picks Johnny’s brain for bits and

pieces of Italianese to use in his articles. It's what he's known for—that, along with his artfully sex-laced articles.)

Paul and his favorite JW, Wally's wife, Gladys Brown, had a set-up of a few bistro tables and bentwood chairs on the black-and-white squares of linoleum, up against the old store window of the low-ceilinged room.

Teatime is the highpoint of the day; and while the others in their little club occasionally have a small order of Gladys's deep fried Long Island Fish 'n Chips, served in a red-and-white checked cardboard boat lined with newspaper, Paul never goes over his fifty-cent limit that gets him refills of hot water and fresh tea bags—and, the occasional handful of teabags he helps himself to for tea later on with Moss Mossbacher, his reactionary friend he for some reason tolerates, back in his kitchen at home.

From their table overlooking the sidewalk they watch Wally's customers enter the door that rings a little bell, then queue up in front of the fluorescent-lit display case piled with ice chips to choose from the freshest assortment of seafood available anywhere on the East Coast.

The backstreet is where all the real action is in Port Jefferson. Let the tourists fresh off the ferry trudge up and down Main, leaving it to the adventurist strays amongst them to delight in its discovering—and conveniently, Johnny's optometrist's office is just two blocks up the sidewalk from Wally's, curved into the base of the long hillside that nestles the village down by the harbor.

Paul stopes in to collect Johnny and the two walk to the fish store chatting with shop owners, antique dealers, artists, theatre people, collectors, rag pickers, bohemians, tradesmen, hippies playing instruments, students, poets, would-be writers, backstreet oddballs and talkative old-salt mariner type along the way.

10: His curious death.

That's the way it was a typical Saturday afternoon a few weeks ago when Johnny told Paul he'd like to sit him down at the phorofter device and check his prescription before they went to tea. Paul obediently obliged. The writer showed child-like deference to anyone who had gone through the mysterious initiatory process that earned them a medical degree. It must have harkened back to his days starting at the age of seven when his mother marched him down the sidewalk by his ear to report for his very first job—at Iorio's grand, spanking new drugstore. He can picture the hubbub of traffic and people as he rushed prescriptions on his bicycle to gravely ill patients; it seemed to him that Dr. Pelligrini and Dr. Apollinare, with their stinking powders and unguents, emetics, oils and syrups, chemicals, patent medicines and pills of all kinds and colors, possessed a mysterious knowledge which could actually hold sway over illness and death!

Still though, strange how one so unruly as Paul Di Donato deferred unquestioningly to doctor's orders: to the man who stood in from time to time as his Father Protector—this grownup who will see to his wellbeing after such a terrible tragedy. He would listen respectfully, even reverently, then continue smoking his Chesterfields and drinking his jug wine every night following a backbreaking day of mixing mortar, building forms, tearing forms down and slinging block.

And why not drink his guinea red each night, is his attitude. How shitty the irony of having once basked in the limelight of a smash novel only to piss away the royalties on his brothers and sisters; especially the child who was soon to be born when the father was killed—that nasty little bastard, Eddie.

Oh, he could kick himself in the ass every day for a thousand years for not seeing what a waste it all was. . . By the time he met Kathleen in the Tap Room of the New Ionia Hotel the money was running out. Three months later when his clamming buddy, Fiorello LaGuardia, married them (*“Mayor Marries Concrete Conchy,”* as the NY Times reported it) in his Gracie

Mansion office, there was just enough left to buy the abandoned poultry farm out on the Island.

Within a year his only option was to buy an old dump truck and cement mixer with the two brothers he could bear, John and Mikey, and go into business as Di Donato Bros. Masonry.

That lasted a few years until Mickey got a real job in the Madison Avenue racket and things fell apart from there, forcing him back onto the big union jobs which meant massive, dangerous structures, brutal time schedules with goading foreman: insane asylums and VA hospitals being built west, in closer to the City.

He found himself running short commutes again on the Long Island Railroad, just like the Northport days and back, dancing on the scaffolds to the tune of the giant construction companies and union bosses—The cold beast had caught up with him again and murky night visions have him trapped high up, ten stories up on a swinging scaffold and the March light is fading fast and the frigid wind is picking up and there is no way to get back safely to the ground no way to return to the warmth of Mama’s kitchen next to the coal stove.

Bastard sonofabitch Job! It killed your father and you’ll never be able to shake the thought that it’ll kill you too. . .

“Here Paul, sit here and get comfortable. Look right into the eyepieces here . . . Okay, how’s that? . . . Now I’ll bring up the first screen. Start with the large letter at the top of the pyramid and let’s see how many lines down you can go.”

Paul read off the letters with the same obedient sincerity as during his Hoboken grammar school examination with the good-smelling American doctor in his brown tweed jacket some forty years earlier.

“Good. Now tell me when the pyramid starts to split and you begin to see two separate images.”

Paul waited. The triangle of letters began to blur and then to separate into two distinct geometric shapes. At some point—and it seemed like far off in a vague, past eternity, like he had been there waiting with the shifting

coastline and draining tidal pools—he found that he had lost all sense of time. What he saw in the machine was his All, excluding all external distractions; and he welcomed it without question because all the shitty little looming trivialities of daily life—the mortgage payment, fuel oil bills, broken down truck, the insurance payments and grocery bills—were now non-existent! He curiously analyzed the sensation that he had passed out into vivid consciousness, perhaps the first real consciousness of his life. He seemed to glide through a membrane the way a cinematographer follows an actor through walls on the dark soundstage. He became alarmed but intuitively trusted when his head began to vibrate (after all, this is too fantastic to back out now!) at a super-high frequency while all he could see was blazing fiery orange tuned to the identical pitch. He knew not where he was, but knew he was everywhere, omni present, and knew it with the most amazing certitude he had ever experienced in his life. It suddenly dawned on him that this was what it was like to die. And it felt so euphorically wonderful (better than all that tawdry sex) that he wanted to run and tell Kathleen, tell her why have I been so afraid all these years—terrified to the core of my life since the morning they carried my father’s casket up the stairwell and into the front parlor; seeing them remove the lid and faced with the ghastly sight within and being told to kiss the cold wax of his made-over face, made to touch my trembling hot face to his icy deadness—But This. This is a-bit-of alright, I’ll say I will; but you don’t want to frighten your Kathleen no matter how happy you are about dying, so you’ll turn it into one of your routines and put on a cockney voice, like right out of Mr. Hudson and Mrs. Bridges on the little portable telly on the kitchen table at dinnertime and make her howl with laughter. . . Oh my dearest Kathleen—What fun we had—But this I must not question, my only Love—"

The Earth dropped away from under him as if a trap door and silent space sucked him far above the globe—The place he knew as home fell away ‘til barely a discernable speck—yet, somehow, to his phantasmagorical amazement, found that he had plunged to the bottom of the deepest troughs of the deepest oceans and knew all life surrounding him, knew every creature and fish; they welcomed him; he was sure of it—every protozoan,

every sea anemone and speck of algae on the planet as he felt the globe powerfully rotating with a sub-basso rumble—He felt unity with every living cell of every creature in all the seas, on the land and in the air—He raced inches below the surface of cool salty ocean and burst upward into the glaring sunlight as juvenile speckled dolphin—He dove to black cold depths and became the all-knowing eye of the giant blue whale which remembered the beginnings; it was too thrilling to be believed, yet familiar and comforting; it's the way it always Was and shall always Be—Without Warning! a clustered galactic swirling-white center collapsed with a slam that shook eternity sucking him into the heaviest space-celestial consciousness ever conceived by God and exploded him out the other side (he laughed with glee just like when he was a kid riding the Thunderbolt at Coney Island) amongst the gasses to form dust, rocks and spheres while unbounded matter continued to fly expanding apart—He realized (and this was probably the best part) that he had the complete freedom to see whatever he so desired; and even better, to ask any question, any question at all (and he had plenty) (and it wasn't as if he had *requested* this or asked anyone to go out of their way)—THERE! Can that be! There down below as delicate glowing white mold with fluffy peaks covering the surface of the continents was all of humanity—All whom had ever been! and he's amazed (and rather relieved) that there's no distinction as to character or deeds or personality or likes or dislikes—No way to judge or condemn—All are Godly perfection—His father is pure and Divinely Perfect—No sin to cast upon him—No indictment—No verdict—No sentence in purgatory to be handed down—His earthly-plane actions of infidelity and violence and vendettas and prejudices and arrogance and conceit are uniquely suited for him—His words, his thoughts, his deeds, are meant for him and him alone; the man he knew as his Father is a character in a play speaking lines specifically written for him and him alone to evolve his struggling Soul, traveling many, many timeless galaxies, always returning, moving ever towards perfection ever towards completion through its own flawless Cosmonautico Continuum; And Now: In the Theatre of Tenement, the opening scenes are but the blink of an eye—The character Geremio inhabits a temporal vehicle as deemed by

the All One . . . He sees his father bathed in unsullied pure light; he sees the true beauty and perfection of his being: One Love not flawed in any conceivable manner—All functions in the service of the Universal Soul—All the conundrums of the life he had known are now perfectly clear, sprawled out across rich black time by the hot flickering projector up in the booth at the rear of the old Lincoln Theatre, as a child gazing agape up at the huge screen—Now expanding, curving, rounding, circling him—overlapping endlessly . . . The slowly revolving screen displays a Capraesque montage of calendar pages floating back up onto the dingy kitchen wall, ferrying him back through the decades, now slowing—Slowing—The years dwindle down and the camera dollies in for a close-up of the final date to float back up lazily, but dramatically with swelling orchestration, into the frame: September 4, 1916—The child in the audience is witness to his destined attraction to unite with his mother’s egg—His singled-out gravity infuses, pushing its way into the cluster of cells; it animates the bloody red plasma-like matter as the first ignition of his being—His infinite past continues forward, melding with his destined future conjured from eternity, and taking hold, grasping to new life, three flights up on a wooden deck supported by beams that buttress on precarious red brick walls built by Irish immigrants sixty years earlier . . . And the very same *knowing* of this vision is shared, equally, with his departure after the last beat of his aged, tired old heart . . . His sons, Aleck and Richard, his brother John and John’s burly funny cowboy stepson, Billy (who has always really liked his Uncle Paul a lot and made the trip all the way from Tarzana with his stepdad to be by his uncle’s bedside at—) surround him . . . There also seem to be some others there: a few lost souls, minor characters, nonetheless devoted acolytes over the years of the great writer; they know their one leg up to a bit of statue in town is about to come to an end . . . The unlikely group is in a private room fifteen stories up in a glass-skinned tower of steel, cement block and glazed ceramic with blazing noon sun streaming through a crystalline January day—He remembers laying block on this building (and sonofabitch wouldn’t it be University Hospital—Yes! On the crappy Stony Brook campus!), and he could point out every one of them on various floors and in corridors and

elevator shafts: He remembers every twist of the trowel wrist; every sight-sound-smell—every moment, no matter how minuscule the subdivision time itself determined—He looks down through the unfinished poured-slab floors supported by rust-red painted girders and smells the steel and cement and lime and sees the dying old man in the motorized hospital bed surrounded by his family—Christ!—What an obscene, pissy ending—He had suspected he'd be seeing something along these lines someday—But This! The exhausted nurses sit at their station out on the floor by the elevators sharing a lunch of greasy Chinese takeout and celebrate a birthday with cupcakes and a fold-out birthday card signed by everybody; they even have one of those banners you can get printed-up in town (he'd seen them at Darling's new copy center in Port Jeff) hanging over the front desk so it would be the first thing you see when the elevator doors opened—He tries to yell: "Hey you dumb bastards; how about some solemnity here; the famous author's dying in that room just down the hall a few feet away; how about some fucking respect here!" But what's the use . . . His brother Mikey and his wife, Joan, arrive late from Wantagh: "Are we too late?" NO, there's still a very small portion of him remaining down there in the spent old body on the medicinal-smelling bed with plastic mattress cover . . . As he looks down, observing with writer's eye, the fear of death melts away as warm syrup flowing down from the crown of his head (no matter its having been envisioned countless times in the past as a most profound affair; and certainly a highly dignified event—unlike this crappy little get-together—the farewell to a giant amongst men, surrounded by a full symphony orchestra and tiers of chorus in black velvet singing Verdi's crowning achievement, his *Messa da Requiem*. . .)

And Now.....D.S. al fine:

The piano player in the pit of the old Lincoln cues the beginning of the final climactic reel as the smoky projector up in the booth flickers, churning away—The surrounding screen advances on all fronts, as if hydraulically, both lifting and dropping, circling him from all directions to show layered spheres—Orbs within Orbs—Down towards a center which continuously recedes smaller and smaller without ever ceasing—Forever and Ever without

End . . . He remembers rushing towards the ever-shrinking source of All—
But—There is no final core—No beginning—No source to be reached—For,
as he plunges speed-of-light headfirst ever deeper towards the Infinite
Nucleus—The Smallest from which there is No Smaller—He sees—So very
far off—Entirely new celestial systems glowing in the distance, while he
knows that above him, his infinite past, time without beginning—The Ever
Expanding—the Unbounded—Races simultaneously Away. . .

11: Continuing on to Port Jefferson.

The lumpy back roads taking him to the main route of 25A, running east-west, barely disturb fall-upon-fall's collection of brown and red leaves packing the floor of the woodlands. This was one of the many footpaths of the local tribes gently traveled by the people who thrived as part of nature millennia upon millennia—unchanging, unimproved in their daily lives of family and ritual and camp building—of planting and growing and fishing and collecting their shellfish at water's edge, appreciatively taking gentle deer and small animals and, of local skirmishes and their perfect knowing of the Great Creator; remaining in complete equilibrium that needed not expansion nor tampering with since their centuries-long migration over the Northern Wilderness.

He felt an intruder who had wrenched this perfect path from them and paved it for his own personal gain. If only he could live and clam and hunt and plant crops side-by-side with his brothers and sisters, the first proletariat of the continent, that would be the idealist's ideal. The mechanical chaos of the exploding Twentieth Century still rang and slammed in his ears—Too much—Too young. It had damaged his nerves and all he wanted was quiet. The irony, of course, was that all *was* quiet out at their waterfront paradise and the sole thing to shatter that was the unholy resurrection of poor Harry, the hotel manager, each-and-every night at dinnertime.

The sun smattering through the overhanging limbs raised his spirits. It gave him an optimistic sense of adventure and time to reflect and daydream. He also needed to map out the narrative of his next short story, O'Malley's Rose, a kiss n' tell memoir of his first sex for one of the splashy girlie magazines, where all the action is these days.

And thank God for them. They're his literary lifeline to survival—Oh sure, the stick-in-the-mud Presbyterians in the Three Villages (and that's where the kids went to school; Kathleen saw to that) would tsk-tsk behind her back in Bohack's, the supermarket on Port Jeff's main street: "That's the wife of

that Di Donato fellow. He's been writing for those smutty, disgraceful magazines again. Filthy. Just plain filthy!"

The predictability of their gossip bored him: "Fuck all-of-youz *and* the horse you rode in on," was what he said to that. All that mattered was that he was being published nationally and a big name on the pulp circuit (although in the industry there was the understanding that Di Donato was the most literary of them all these days). And even more satisfying was his ardent local fan club who hung on his every hot new story to hit the newsstand at Darling's Stationary—even old Mr. Darling, Clyde Darling's brother. (He waited till there were no other customers at the register to heap lascivious admiration on Paul while singling out his favorite passages: "Did that really happen, Paul? Did doing that really drive her crazy—did it!")

The stream of spattering sun flooded the windshield. The universe in miniature pulsed between his eyes and triggered cascading messengers of peace and love to his bloodstream—God! Euphoria is being alive. No explaining it. But he was sure of it nonetheless, even in light of—perhaps maybe because of—the voices of those whom he had loved; those whom he had to go on without. Their gossamer images flicker through his mind as quickly as one of those single beams between the passing leaves above—heartbreaking cameos of the past: His dear, sweet sister Ann whom he adored. That afternoon years ago upon returning home—the wailing, the deep, deep sobs as he entered the house. He knew those sounds. He had felt those sounds before. If only he could have backed out of the doorway, removed his hat and apologized for having walked into the wrong house. But there was no turning round. Time must go forward. Be strong. Be brave:

"Mary. What's happening? What is this!"

"Ann. Ann. My baby sister Annina. Oh God no. Oh God Paul, this cannot be. . . Paul. Please, rescue us! This cannot be!"

Mary crumpled to the kitchen table, moaning and sobbing uncontrollably; Paul tried to break through her state.

"What do you mean? Ann is coming home today. She's being discharged—"

“—No, Paul, no. They say she collapsed—”

Mary struggled for air. The big sister to all the children of Geremio and Annunziata choked with fear as she tried to explain to her brother what had happened.

“—while she was getting dressed to come home! An ‘embolism,’ they say. They say . . . they say . . . Ohhh God Oh God—Oh God deliver us. Deliver us oh my blessed Jesu—Blessed Sacred Heart pleeez I beg of you. Do—Not—Let—This—Be!”

—And, of course, his mother who died in his arms. This, the woman who had dominated over all adversity who in the end was unable to halt the cancer.

And lastly, with the thought of his young handsome father crushed under tons of brick and floor joists, studs and flooring planks (as such a habitual companion) the seance, the ritual, had begun.

He had been wandering these mental images since he was a boy. His personal recipe of synapse sparks and chemicals was for his and his use alone. His brothers and sisters, and his mother, had their own quiet hell, and together as the wounded whole—after their father’s death, after her husband’s death—they would pool their devastated lives under the same roof of an incomplete home out from the City in Bensonhurst. But inwardly, silently, each had no choice but to build their own individually constructed damp wall of suffering. . .

Survival began that March as dusk approached; and each day of the calendar since has been strung to the next by fear and a vague sense of despair, their hearts hardened in scar tissue—so strong was the slain patriarch; so alive and charismatic was the *paesano Abruzzese*, who in 1905 had arrived in New York Harbor a year ahead of his wife first born, Maria, that the crushing of that bigger-than-life presence left a black vacuum. And here it was, all laid out in front of him traveling through the gullied woods on a crudely paved tar lane removed from the nagging every-day realities.

But that all ended when he came to the stop sign at County Road 25A. Here it changed direction taking a hard right onto the main road (some

would say ‘highway’) that would run him due west, in the general direction of Port Jefferson for the first time, but not directly, it’s just that Port Jeff was west from his house in Mount Sinai, and the first leg, the wonderful part of his drive, had him heading him south to pick up that direct run of tasteless 25A. (It sounds a bit circuitous, I know, but it’s the fastest way to get there.)

From here the secretive beauty was left behind, traded for an unplanned, corrupted hodgepodge of simple wood-frame buildings and cinderblock structures with old garage doors, used for one purpose or another: small businesses; gas stations; one-man used car lots with tattered flapping colored triangles; farm equipment outlets with tractors and rusting implements; Loper Bros. Lumber Yard; an occasional roadhouse with taproom, dinner and dancing; a working-man’s bar with lunch specials and Rheingold Beer on tap; the Acropolis Diner; Fiedler Bros. TV Repair; Carvel soft ice cream stand of stainless and glass; the Wagon Wheel Restaurant (Fine Dining in the Log Cabin on 25A); and a few post-war motels with half-lit neon pole signs that ran day and night.

His kids loved the white plaster Long Island duck that served as the front office of the Duckling Inn Motor Court. The giant duck was entered by the front door in its chest with a row of windows running down each side under her tucked wings. Each Memorial Day weekend the locals got together to freshen up the whitewash and repaint her orange bill. What had started years earlier in honor of the old Polish duck farmer, Stanislov, had become a local custom of forgotten origin. But some of the old timers recall those days: He had given up the raising of ducks for the fancy restaurants in the City towards the end of the war, opting to build his long-dreamed motor court instead. They say he was a new man once he didn’t have to kill all those ducks anymore.

A bit past “Betty the Pekin,” Mount Sinai’s plaster mascot, was the family-run dairy, Randal Farms. The Guernsey herds lounged in the grass on both sides of the road and you occasionally had to stop for crossing tractors and cows.

Finally, you’d come to a stop light, take a hard right (in the direction of the water for the first time, if coming from the Di Donato home on the

Sound) and cross the railroad tracks which meant you were entering Port Station, or 'Upper Port'—a thoroughly undistinguished three or four blocks of badly dated storefronts anchoring cheap apartments upstairs above the beat-up sidewalks, complete with skewed telephone poles sunk in the concrete and hung with masses of powerlines right down the center of the neglected village.

And Okst Liquors has been the busiest doorway on those sidewalks ever since Lillian's now deceased husband, Boris Okst, the wild Russian Jew, opened the business right after the war. Paul and Kathleen had been very fond of Boris. Paul considered him as having "the soul of an artist," as he would say, and that was all it took for the writer to respect another man. So, it only followed that when he initially had tried to reduce him to 'just another Jew opening just another liquor store'—he failed. He overlooked Boris' shameless capitalist trait and embraced him as 'a thinker,' much like he had his neighbor, Louie Ducoff, the scholarly Jewish boy across the airshaft back in his building when he was a kid, who would change the way his mind worked forever.

Boris had gained a reputation amongst the locals when the funny, high-strung guy from the City moved out to the sticks to open the store. ("He's what you call a *bohemian*," explained the more worldly amongst them.) But he kept his apartment in the West Village even after buying their big Victorian on Barnum Avenue, down in Lower Port set back from the harbor up on one of the surrounding hillsides.

When he had had enough of the country, he'd jump on the train at the station catty-corner from the liquor store to recharge amongst his kind in the Village.

That apartment, in conjunction with his spontaneous behavior, was his undoing. The day he arrived back from the country and had forgotten his key, locking himself out, was to be the last day of his life. . . . Attempting to scale out onto a ledge of his building from a neighbor's bedroom window, he plummeted six stories to his death on the dirty sidewalk below. The way he died resonated with Paul; a violent, crushing end so easily transforms loving

animated warm flesh into so much pulpy rubble on the street. He tried to imagine Boris' last moment of life, his last seemingly forever conscious instant as he sailed inexorably to the pavement; he tried, but ultimately, that was the kind of thing that happened to other people; or was it (and granted, it's a subtle difference) that he was deeply relieved that it *only* happened to other people—even if that meant it included his very own father amongst them.

12: Entering Port Station.

Port Jefferson Station was the final stop on the North Shore line of the Long Island Railroad; and up until the mid-fifties its slow-grinding turntable turned the steam locomotives around to head west, back to Penn Station. But these days, the unromantic diesels have a nose and cab on both ends and the turntable rusts quietly.

The end of the line seemed the natural locale for collecting lost souls and railroad down-and-outers of all stripes; and Lillian's store has been supplying the station men with their cheap relief for decades now. And you can bet they know well the protocol when entering her liquor store: Never get in the way at the register when a respectable customer is being waited on; never raise your voice or draw attention to yourself; carry yourself with a subservient, second-rate citizen posture—and above all, never ruin a sale.

Whether the pragmatic Grumman Aircraft, VFW Lodge member who enjoys his Dewar's on the rocks with a splash of seltzer each evening, or one of the Belle Terre elite high atop the cliffs overlooking the harbor, or even, yes, one of those hobos living in a room above the hardware store with two other guys, Lillian rings them up with an equanimity that only cash can inspire.

The rumble of the tracks in crossing (And yes, that rumble alerts his memory to recall the liquor store owner—and with good reason and from here he can make out the façade of Lillian's store half a block up ahead on the left) takes him instantly back to the humiliating great Florida Disaster of '55; of being broke and barred from their own house upon their desperate return north.

The boys were quite young then, seven and ten, he recalls, and Kathleen was convinced that they should move the family down to the Sunshine State—to the good life, the Gold Coast, where plenty of booming opportunity awaited them. “—Why, Justine told me just the other night how

that stretch of the coast, they can't build places fast enough. She says that you could find yourself one of the biggest contractors in no time! Dido darling, our problems would be over—"

Justine, Kathleen's dearest friend, just two years earlier had moved from Bay Shore, on the South Shore, to a '40s Spanish-style white stucco bungalow in Pompano. It was a completely different world overhung by tall curving palm trees on a dreamy little side-canal of the Intracoastal. They spoke on the phone often, and the two conspired that it was a must: she would convince Paul that Florida was the place for them. Once he finally relented, the Mount Sinai house was put on the market. But did not sell. Paul balked and insisted it was a sign that they should stay put. But Kathleen went behind his back and spoke to their theatre friend in the City, The Countess Off-Broadway, drama coach Maria Piscator. Her plan was to convince Maria that she should rent the Mount Sinai house to use as her 'theatre camp,' for all her aspiring young protégées in Town.

And Maria could certainly play the part: Her amazingly aristocratic air and French accent combined with her chic' European manner, painted an incontrovertible picture of high erudition and prestige. Maria's self-promoting energies were indefatigable. All wished to be brought into her inner circle, and in doing so, the novice actor or musician might very well audition for the director or conductor who would give them their big break.

Born in Vienna at the End of the Century, Maria and her famous leftist director husband, the German born Erwin Piscator, had moved to New York in 1939 fleeing the Nazis and cashed in by dreaming up psychological, hocus-pocus acting techniques at the New School. Erwin also lucked out when he brought "that terrible load of crap," as Paul referred to him, Bertolt Brecht to the New York stage.

"—Maria, darling, think what a marvelous retreat our place here on the water would make. The perfect theatre camp you've been speaking of for ages now; bring all those talented young discoveries of yours out to the country and have a ball, simply a ball on your very own beautiful beach!"

Well, Maria and her crowd moved in, and then she decided to take her sweet time before leaving (and she knew Paul had no taste, or the money, to go the legal route to get her out).

Violin exercises from the staffed pages of Cooke's *Mastering the Scales and Arpeggios* wafted from the breezy open windows of Aleck's upstairs bedroom and out over the back lawn. Her protégées drove or took the train out to her beachside performing arts camp. Non gave a thought as to whose home this was—who lived and dreamed and loved or fought and agonized and created in the rooms of the big farmhouse, originally a classic four over four with angled hip roof.

The house had been added on to over the years with an enlarged kitchen, a pantry and mudroom entry on the rear of the house facing the beach. Banks of divided-light windows enclosed the front porch that wrapped around the west side.

The strangers sleeping in their beds and cooking in their kitchen knew nothing of the family of Paul Di Donato, who had always been at home and secure in this place on the green, overgrown edge of the Island—this dreamy place known only to the few who had ever entered the hidden dirt drive with perfect grass strip leading through the woods, winding, then opening to small meadow of saplings and massive shrub clusters where so many birds foraged and determinedly built their nests deep in the berried foliage.

Maria's crowd took in the hazy summer pleasures of the remote property which was originally built by a native Long Island poultry farmer. Some explored through the dilapidated, long shed coups with glass panes fragilely held in place by shrunken, silvery muntins whose glazing had cracked and fallen away many years ago.

But his youngest, Aleck, knew these secret places were his alone. These people hadn't daydreamed away so many summer days; so many clear, sunny September afternoons on adventures deep in the quiet chicken sheds, until drawn to the waving dune grass and then across tumbled pebbles and down to the Sound's lapping waves.

Paul's thoughts dragged him over glass shards reliving the scenes when his family lunged from pillar to post, from borrowed cash to cheap rentals and finally humiliating charity at Lillian's big house in order to house the kids. And subliminally, when it had reached that point, he knew that only Kathleen had the kind of strength needed to protect the boys and her mother.

Pushed by desperation to the edge, her Scotch pride reduced to base protectionist instincts—she resolved to find a way. She must see that her two boys, her mother, Mrs. Dean, and herself, have a roof over their heads and warm beds to sleep in while Paul stayed in the City. School was starting in a week and the boys must be registered and have new clothes to start the school year.

—So, Kathleen went to Lillian, Lillian Okst with hat in hand, a posture she was totally unaccustomed to. She found it especially distasteful given it was the liquor store moneychanger whom she was reduced to plead before. Her DAR blood simmered at the prospect.

She rehearsed various approaches in the car by herself that late August afternoon on her way to the Barnum Avenue house. 'Jonesy' was minding the store; Kathleen had called ahead. They were to have lunch. She ran through a mental floor plan of the three-story Victorian—certainly more than enough room with just Lillian and Jonesy occupying the house; and he had his little room with its connecting sitting room off the kitchen on the backside of the building off the kitchen. It was the kind of quarters originally used for giving birth, tending the very ill, and dying. And then there were the garret rooms up on the third floor; why, there was room alone up there for the whole family!

Poor Jonesy was no problem; Kathleen had long thought him a poor dear, one of those minutia-crazed intellectual Columbia refugees out from the City who could never find his way back. He had started on with Lillian after the war as a young English lit. grad clerking in the store.

He had actually, like how many others who found themselves in Port Station, fallen asleep on the North Shore line and was woken up by the

conductor when they pulled into the last stop. He wandered to the diner to kill time and noticed the 'Help Wanted' sign in the window of the liquor store. That must be going on twelve years now, Kathleen noted to herself; yes, and he's been "writing his novel" whenever not in that dreadful store ever since . . . How like her. She moved Jonesy into the big house to swallow his life up in her all-consuming world of the merchant, the business owner, and even the provider of the very roof over the poor man's head. A serf! A serf who acquiesced humbly so as to live within the towered walls of the Okst embattlements.

And now, she was about to cross the moat of Lillian's most secure realm. Her ever-so-Anglo Lady of the by-gone Grand Hotel era was coming to Lillian Okst, liquor store owner, Bulgarian Jewess, to plead her tale of temporary misfortune and hard-to-speak-of . . . just plain broke; words that stuck in Kathleen's throat and caused her to resent Paul all that much more.

All those thoughts and emotions, though, must be suppressed. For the time being where shall she call home for her children, which, of course, included Mrs. Dean who had been a millstone totally dependent on Kathleen Alexandria since she was a teenager.

13: Recalls their return from Florida.

Unable to shake the retelling of the story, he recalls it was 1957—yes, the fall of '57.

Kathleen and the gang arrived back from Pompano and the boys had to start school right away, and back at Setauket, no less, at Melville's new school.

Kathleen insisted the boys attend the very best there was. Paul liked that; in fact, he loved her all the more for that heroic nature of hers. She feared nothing. And he could never understand this; but he understood well her ability to get seemingly impossible things done: They didn't live in the Setauket School District. Never mind. The suave principal with charming Austrian accent was a friend of theirs; he admired Paul while also sporting a mad crush on Kathleen.

The insignificant little oyster town on the North Shore had had a typical two-story frame schoolhouse until the quiet, bygone-era philanthropist in the community set his heart to building the finest new grade school in the country. He not only personally funded the huge project, but also saw to every detail of the fabulous Philadelphia brick buildings on lush rolling acreage he donated—assigning his architect, Boston trained Richard Smyth, to the task.

Ward Melville was a private citizen; but his Setauket School was to be a public school staffed with the finest teachers recruited from across the country, and open to every child in the district, without exception.

And no, Kathleen wouldn't hear of having the boys (for Harriett had already moved on to high school in Port Jeff) get a second-rate farmhand education out in Mount Sinai. The opening of the school had coincided with their absence; and by hook or by crook both Richard and Aleck upon their return were to attend the magnificent new school in Setauket; and of course, the charming new principal would personally see to their enrollment. She was confident in this.

Keeping the Twentieth Century from entering his little villages was Melville's obsessive hobby. The shoe factory magnate fashioned Stony Brook, and nearby Setauket, after meticulous colonial drawings

Setauket, however, was especially dear to his heart for the hamlet included his Caroline Church, the historic Episcopal church dating from the colonies and Queen Caroline. Setauket was in the history books telling of the founding of America.

Work on the open post-and-beam construction had begun in 1729, wrought by the hands of descendants of some of the earliest English arrivals to the Continent. These were the pilgrims who had managed to maintain a friendly coexistence with the local Setalcott Indians; while ironically, in a few short generations many of those families were to take up arms against their own, their fellow English.

This was the kind of history that deeply inspired the good-hearted do-gooder. His vision for the little hamlets felt like a personal crusade; one he delighted in.

And now, in the era when Kathleen's children were to be raised properly in the Episcopal Church, Ward was the beloved patron of the parish's historical structure, seeing to it that the simple cedar-shake steeple was authentically restored, including the curation of the musket ball lodged in it: a result of the much-touted skirmish waged on the Village Green in front of the church during the Revolutionary War. Setauket history buffs were quick to point out that George Washington, actually *had*, slept here, and at the Roe Tavern, to be precise.

Ah, yes, her Caroline Church. Such a contrast, and just a few miles away. He couldn't help but compare it to the sad little scene before him passing through Port Station.

But it all appealed to him greatly, perhaps because it held such an inaccessible air denied him his entire life. And to mask that insecurity in pithy irreverence, he would call her—and in front of guests, no less—"his Episcopal white woman." But that too was undeniably true. She saw to it

that the boys were baptized and later confirmed in that church. It was the following spring after moving back from Florida that Aleck had started Confirmation classes on Sundays, in preparation for the High Church ceremony denoting one's official passage into the Church of England.

Paul had certainly not objected to the boys being raised in the Episcopal church. That portion of his thinking, that portion that secretly envied the blue-blood American (ashamed of the gaudy pageantry and machinations of his pagan Catholicism) wholeheartedly approved.

His boys would not suffer the stigma he went through countless times growing up. My boys will be part of the privileged class in the goddamned country, he told himself. Because Paul Di Donato knew who he was. He was a self-schooled authority on his own peasant bloodline that had echoed back from the Adriatic coast, up into the foothills reaching a small woolen town, Taranta Peligna. (But there was also that intriguing story, in fact, told to him by the mayor of Taranta on his first trip to Italy: It told of the famed Italian poet and playwright, a count, an aestheticist, an aviator, a seducer, the occupier of Fiume and the lightning rod of Italy's craving for returned Imperial greatness and irredentist expansion—the man who, amongst numerous other fantastic achievements, had invented fascism—who allegedly had seduced his grandmother as a young girl in the home of the town's master, the woolen mill owner, while a guest there, thereby siring his illegitimate father.)

And yes, of course he was swarthy; no matter he had been named in the columns as one of the 'Ten Best Looking Men in America'—he was still, swarthy. The dark mix of Hellenic, Italic, Persian and Byzantine blood circulated on the trade routes of war spilling into all ports throughout the ancient world—But marrying the Anglo Kathleen Alexandria Dean was his insurance against his boys turning out typical Italian kids, "little guinea kids."

And as for her brief history married to the white-haired hotel manager almost thirty years older than herself—what of it? It did accomplish one thing of use; it proved she could produce a golden-locked child, her little

girl, Harriet, the goddamned namesake of her goddamned Dutch father, Harry!

It was that very evening, the same day after the hotel manager's 11:00 a.m. funeral in Oneonta, that she first laid eyes on the young writer in the Tap Room of Harry's New Ionia Hotel. The new widow had a suite for herself and a room for her mother to take care of little three-year-old Hadi. Passing McEwing Bros. Hardware he recalls the story about Harry being still fresh, so to speak, having been kept on ice for almost four months until the Upstate ground thawed enough to dig his grave—Old news. The old lush had been dead since the night before Christmas! “—and all through the hotel, not a creature was stirring, etc., etc.,” he chuckled somewhat audibly to himself.

But for some reason, recalling the family's eventual reunion soothed-over his easily flared anxieties. And as broke and unsure a return as it was, it was nevertheless their return home. Harriett oversaw the road trip north that early September doing all the driving (he quipped how the young dyke was a better driver than any man he'd ever met.) He awaited them while living with his agent in the City, down on Washington Square.

The rest of them piled into the Ford station wagon, including Mrs. Dean along with Tommy the cocker, and once again, Pete the parakeet, chirping joyously and raising his wings to the hot southern breezes flooding through the open windows.

It was a thrilling adventure for the boys, especially seeing as how everything was in the brazen hands of their big sister. Everything was sure to be alright as long as 'Sis' was in charge—and at nine, Aleck had an obsessed penchant for the pop-chart radio hits streaming over the airwaves round-the-clock. The Ford's dashboard rang with the slamming backbeat, visceral harmonies and verboten lyrics of The Coasters' "Young Blood," as the hopeful family ran open Highway A1A up through northern Florida and into Georgia.

His big sister's portable HI-FI record player, finished in red and white stamped vinyl, had hooked him early-on in the Pompano bungalow—when she had first brought it home from the record store at the modern new Pompano Plaza. Something irresistible happened when the groove reined in the needle and the oval speaker began pumping those vibrating harmonics, the timber and emotions of those exciting singers and musicians, cutting right to his little eight-year-old soul—while his big sister, the girl about to turn twenty, was city-sick for the secret new life she had immediately taken to after high school—reveled in—before abruptly having to flee the City.

Hadi ceaselessly played the anthem LP of all young, New York-smitten homosexuals: The part orchestral suite, part radio-style romance, *Manhattan Tower*, filled the Pompano cracker bungalow day and night. They were surrounded by overhanging coconut trees and set back from A1A in a deep sandspur lot.

She synced her lines along with each character to perfection. And if it happened to be a particularly inspired rendition, tears streamed down her young, hot, lesbian cheeks. . . Aleck loved it all! Whether the soundtrack to flaccid Bing Crosby's *High Society*, with Satchmo infusing some life, or Les Paul and Mary Ford's "Jambalaya," it was all magic—pure magic.

14: Lunch with Lillian.

Lillian had prepared a lunch that appealed to her own tastes with little regard for what Paul Di Donato's Scotch-English wife would prefer—much less like. She had a deli-style spread on the table by the time Kathleen arrived. The everyday comings and goings were through the kitchen pantry at the back of the house via the ally that ran up behind the old gothic, parallel to Barnum Avenue.

Lillian graciously invited Kathleen into the high-ceilinged dining room with its tall, wavy-pane windows and finished bringing in the silverware and some cold white wine. . . Taking it all in in her best inconspicuous nonchalance, Kathleen mustered an enthusiastic: “scrumptious,” to the very fishy herring in cream sauce, Greek olives, black bread, chopped chicken liver, kosher dills, bloody-rare slices of cold roast beef and, to start off, borsht and sour cream with chopped chives on top.

Lillian, standing all of five-one, carried herself as one accustomed to money—the money of later in life—and its privileges. Her every move was quick and self-assured. She had a uniquely squat-oval face with shiny, puffy cheeks and puffy wet lips to match; glistening fawn eyes and wispy, formless, brittle, badly thinning light brown hair completed her unique appearance. Originally from Bulgaria but educated in the UK due to the family having to follow the father's engineering work, she spoke with a crisp, clipped Euro-centric accent—it was impossible to pinpoint; and when socializing, she somehow always maintained a wide-eyed look of engaged amazement coupled with a slight, while amazingly consistent, poised smile as if preparing to hear the punch line. . . Her manner was confident, consistent, and flawless.

“Paul called me up from the city,” she said with a complex, muted urgency that felt a segue into serious conversation; as in a coy stratagem guaranteeing the topic to arrive precisely where she intended it to, “—he says he's staying with his agent friend, Jacques Chambrun—doesn't he sound like quite the character; apparently some kind of French nobility. With an

actual title! Paul says he's very dapper and loves to get all dressed up and dance with the ladies at the hotels . . . So, tell me, Kathleen, what are your plans? Paul seems rather unhappy and a bit uncertain about things—The boys will be starting back to school soon, won't they?"

Kathleen fumed inside while maintaining a totally placid expression: How dare she tell me all the things—and not particularly good things, at that—I obviously know and know damn well that she knows too. The absolute gall!

"Well dear, you've rung all the bells. I assume then you know about Maria staying in the house—well, I must say—puts us in a very tight spot indeed. Paul is between books and working hard with Jacques to get a contract—with Bennet Cerf, no less, which of course will be marvelous and solve all our problems . . . I don't know why these things take such a dreadfully long time, but apparently they do . . . Bennet Cerf. Now won't that be marvelous.

Finalmente!"

"Absolutely. Paul is a great talent—"

How dare she—the rich Jewess, in a position to laud over us, patronizing me in this manner. As if I don't know my own husband.

"—and it's time a whole new audience gets to know him. Yes, I heard that Maria was not moving out just yet. Has she said how much longer?"

"Oh, she promises this summer will be the last. So that puts us at a full year till next Labor Day . . . and that's, what I'd like to discuss with you, Lillian dear . . . I'll be frank. I'm rather at my rope's end. God knows. It's the boys, and of course my mother. You see, I thought that perhaps something could be worked out . . . here, at the big house; and I managed to get a job with that dear Clyde Darling as his receptionist, answering the phone and such; so I'll be able to pay a bit monthly. I'll buy the groceries and prepare dinner for us all . . . It could be quite an adventure—"

Kathleen's brave, upbeat air started to falter. She caught Lillian's eyes looking straight through her. Her frame straightened with two, short, halting breaths and her upper lip started to quiver slightly—It was, for Kathleen, an unusually awkward and difficult scene (still though, the subtle cracking of her brave façade was delivered with immaculate timing and theatrical finesse).

“Let’s see—” said Lillian as she effortlessly commandeered yet another desperate soul; but this time, the thought of having the upper hand on her friend’s husband, being able to tell her friends that the famous writer is laying bricks—for her—made Kathleen’s humbled visit that much more appealing. “—I’m sure something can be worked out. We need to get the boys settled and ready for school don’t we. Yes, we certainly do . . . Did you have an idea of your budget—an idea of how much you can pay each month?”

Money. Of course. Isn’t it always—

“Well. I spoke to Clyde, and I think seventy-five dollars a month could be managed . . . with groceries and such—”

“I see . . . You know, Kathleen, what I was thinking; I was thinking, and I have been for years now, and I’m sure I’ve mentioned it to Paul at some point, how much I would love to have one of Paul’s magnificent fireplaces—here in the living room,” and her eyes gestured through the wide opening of the pocket doors leading into the formal living room. She went on with authoritative information: “—and they told me that the flue and chimney would have to be redone. It’s the original from 1887, and the fire inspector was not at all pleased when he looked at it last year. I mentioned it to Paul when we spoke.”

“—Now, isn’t that a marvelous idea! I know Paul would love to build you one. Oh, God provides! Isn’t it so, Lillian. Shall I tell Paul and the boys? Are we quite settled then?”

Lillian looked upon Kathleen curiously as the enigma she was. In the moment or two it took to blink her wet, globe-like eyes she admitted to herself that she admired Kathleen, even more than admired, actually; she envied her simple yet devout faith. She noted where it had gotten her. Gotten her through since first marrying Paul. “—I should think that it would be fine. Richard and Aleck are such perfect little gentlemen; and they’ll bring life to the house—keep me from getting old, don’t you know. . . .”

Paul was in the City with Jacques; he'd take the train out on weekends to build the fireplace and supposedly write. Lillian loved Paul's cooking, and he loved to go clamming and make his famous white sauce over linguine.

They were an ancient mixed-Semitic team at the dinner table: cracked blue-claw crabmeat and drawn butter running down their chins; lacking any inhibition whatsoever while slurping twirled forkfuls of spaghetti dripping with clam broth and olive oil and raucously washing it all down with jug wine from the store, up the hill in Port Station. Kathleen did her best to fit in and enjoy herself. Four or five rye sours before dinner and a glass of chilled beer to accompany her Anglicized entrée went a long way to bridge the divide. Paul adoringly tossed her spaghetti just the way she liked it with butter and grated cheese, or, topped with just a serving spoon of simple red sauce along with a thick, bulgy patty of char-broiled aged sirloin from Big George at Bohack's (or sometimes juicy slices of pink London broil off the charcoal grill).

Lobster was her sole preference when it came to seafood. All else she considered repulsive, "fishy." And the thought of eating a clam (whether prepared in any number of ways, or raw on the half-shell) made her ill. An artichoke with drawn butter was one of the few vegetables that appealed to her; that and fresh asparagus with hollandaise sauce. Her upbringing was continents away from the steamed *rabe* and oil-coated *cicoria* which her husband craved nightly—She twirled her spaghetti with careful coordination with pinky flared while Paul got ready to deliver the punch line to his joke in full animation: "—So the porter slides his hand out as the Jew is getting off the train in Los Angeles, his last hope of getting a tip—*finally*, he ceremoniously opens his wallet, carefully thumbs through his bills, pulls out a single and places it in the porter's palm as though it were a fifty—the porter watches him walk away down the platform, takes his cap off, wipes his brow and declares, 'Dems Jews didn't have to crucify Christ. Days just *worried* him to death. . .'"

Sipping her chilled Miller High Life from a tall pilsner glass she threw her head back—her dark auburn hair and creamy white skin aglow in the kerosene lamplight—and laughed so hard she could barely catch her breath.

Such were the high spirits of their late-night dinners by storm lamp on Lillian's screened porch off the kitchen. What earthy, primitive fun—the reward Paul expected every night at dinnertime. Each night must be a ritual. Each night must have a rhythm, a cadence, which built in delicious ascent to heady, euphoric, vino-soaked paradise; blessed relief and a full-full stomach of his favorite delicacies from loamy earth, sediment filled bay bottom and deep, cold pelagic waters. . .

15: Recalls Harriett's story.

His compulsive recollection continues with his sighting of the Sound from Upper Port: Hadi was nineteen or twenty at that time and certainly had a life of her own and had since graduating Port Jeff High. And there wasn't a goddamned thing Kathleen could do about it, he remembers with disgust.

Florida. Sure. Not only did it almost destroy the marriage but also proved the perfect tropical milieu for the fantastically headstrong young dyke Harriett turned out to be. (For mercifully, Kathleen had no previous knowledge of the girl's early and secret Manhattan chapter; but the inevitable truth eventually hit home.)

And when it did it was a cold steel dagger that cut to Kathleen's heart. It caused her endless doubt and speculation as to what went wrong—was it her fault—what could she have done differently that might have changed the inexorable road her darling girl had gone down? Could it have been having a stepfather in Paul? Who should she, who *could* she, believe? He claimed the young girl had started with her precocious advances years back; competing with her mother at just seven, a few years after they were married, and that he wisely saw it for what it was: a strange, dangerous little girl much, much more cunning than her mother and steered clear of the girl's trap by simply ignoring it. He often wondered where such savvy instinct came from, springing forth from such a small child. For he knew that wasn't in line at all with poor old, nice-guy Harry.

Harriet painted a different picture; not all at once but in eked-out increments that took the family deeper and deeper into a bottomless nightmare. ("Well of course," he would come back with. "What else would she claim? It's obvious stuff.") —She resorted to aggression—angry with herself—angry with everyone, as a tactic to divert blame. The best defense is a good offense, her instinctive cunning, that innately perceptive sense of smell of hers, told her. . .

Scenes would erupt in the home seemingly out of nowhere. No one speaks of the time when, about eight years ago, the moody girl held a ten-inch

carving knife to Paul's stomach up in their bedroom and pushed him into the corner with it. Drunk, Paul fell back to a totally passive posture so as not to inflame his stepdaughter any further. The young strong girl berated and humiliated him with her accusations (accusations that always stopped at the water's edge, as if, she herself, could not quite bring herself to say—), screaming hysterically at the top of her lungs, her blond complexion turning bright crimson while pressing the tip of the long carving knife deeper and deeper into his thick chamois work shirt. "Harriett, dear . . . Aleck. This isn't for Aleck, dear. . ." Kathleen told her from an uncanny calmness.

He flinches and takes an extra deep drag on his Chesterfield thinking about it. What the hell. What was he supposed to do? It wasn't his fault. He didn't make her that way. She was born that way. The leopard can't change its spots. She's always loved girls; lived for them since she was a little kid in grade school—she told him just last summer, out in the garden, with no one else around; told him that she had always had mad crushes on her little girlfriends—but none certainly, like Cynthia. . . And that then, later, at Port Jeff High (always the captain of her sports teams, always wearing that goddamned varsity jacket with letter-after-letter sown on) how her long-time love for Cynthia Patrick nearly gave her a nervous breakdown—even dramatically threatening herself with suicide—longing to tell her, but that she dare not, mortified of what she and her crowd would think.

He certainly remembered Cynthia Patrick. . . Of all young Hadi's little girlfriends who would sleep over at the house, Cynthia stood out with her unconscious magnetism. He's always said the mind is a mystery not capable of understanding itself. For him Cynthia Patrick meant clean cotton flannel pajamas with red-striped candy canes around Christmas time. The girls would spend forever in the hot bathtub laughing and shrieking, the smell of the rich steam flooding from the bathroom when they finally bust out into the upstairs hallway wrapped in terrycloth. He could clearly see his stepdaughter's carefully-gauged control of their fun, and Cynthia—pulling the strings, running the show, so to speak.

Hell yes; she told him all about it, alright—the Senior Class Trip to D.C., with her maneuvering to share the same hotel room with Cynthia. Class of '55. I'm making this stuff up. It's what she told me out in the garden. Straight out. Although he neglected to tell his wife, Harriett's mother, that the girl went into spellbinding detail; more than he dare repeat—His slant was much more traditional, acceptable; simply that it was natural for Harriett to find it easier to confide in her stepfather as opposed to her mother. He was well aware of the terrible tension between the two ever since her true life had become obvious to all.

In reality, Harriett's luscious tale began with her telling supernatural stories in the dark when they went to bed in the hotel room. They screamed in the dark. Then she started in about Hal Bishop's "big cock," how it's the talk of the locker room, moaning how she'd love to have it sliding in "real deep," and that sure it would hurt—"but then think how great!" They howled in the dark with excitement and began chanting in unison: "I want cock! I want cock! I want cock!" Then Hadi made her move—the daring move she had been dreaming of for years—and blurted out, "I'm hopping in with you; who wants to be by themselves!" She jumped into Cynthia's bed and snuggled under the covers. There was just enough light from the city outside to make out Cynthia's creamy wide cheeks with adorable blunt nose and crystal green eyes, all the time going on about how she'd handle Hal's "big one," and, "God, I think I'm getting all wet just thinking about it. How 'bout you, Cynth—you too?"

She reveled in telling him that yes, sure enough, it was working. There, in the dark, in a strange place, far from home, far from all conventions of community and parents, Cynthia let her guard down and, "just . . . went along. Just, let it happen.

"—She surrendered to me, Paul. I don't know if she had known all along how much I loved her, how much I longed to be with her in bed; but, we drifted off together and I rubbed my legs up over hers and she giggled and I told her this is how Hal is going to do it to her . . . and I kept going and pushed my face into her neck and we laughed and laughed, and then I told

her, ‘Hal’s going to lay a big kiss on you like this’—and I started to kiss her on the mouth. We giggled some more and I kissed her again. She grew quiet and I kept my mouth pressed to hers. Then . . . then her mouth started to open, and I felt her wet tongue. I was amazed at how warm it was—hot. I had dreamed of feeling her tongue with mine. She went limp under me and we melted into a single hot pool as she put her arms around my neck. She did it with such an easy sort of confidence; like the most natural thing in the world; it was heaven, Paul, simply heaven. I slid her pajama bottoms down to her knees and ran my leg up over hers; I could feel the wonderful little dirty-blond hairs on those muscular thighs—I had always loved those little hairs—my knee rubbed more and more and onto her soft mound for the first time—I can’t tell you— . . . Then, I reached down and pulled them off and threw them on the floor and she opened up and I did everything . . . everything, Paul. Her thighs went limp and I whispered in her ear that I was going to eat her and that she was going to love it—she tasted so good—so delicious and wet. Her creamy stuff seemed endless—”

The stepdaughter proceeded to twist the hook deeper into his gullet for the sheer pleasure of it: “—I don’t know where it all came from gushing in waves. She climaxed so many times, Paul, countless, till she passed out whimpering like a little girl. I lost track; and of time; I think until the sun started to come up.”

Paul listened remaining perfectly silent as if not to break the séance he had been made privy to; the slightest disturbance or distraction might bring the whole vision crashing down. For the brief period, he was rendered powerless under the total domination of the bold stepdaughter—and bereft of all noble qualities and he knew it.

“The next morning, I woke up and she had moved to the other bed. She behaved as though nothing in the world had ever happened. I knew right then that our friendship was through. On the bus ride home she chatted away with all our friends but avoided looking at me . . . She remained friendly, in an awkward sort of way, but we never stayed in touch after that. She never called me again. . .”

—There! What more could you ask for? And from her own lips. Isn't that proof enough—! And then there was Cynthia *Harrison*. The other Cynthia. Let's not forget *her*—that one. She met her at the sports car repair shop where Harrison got that French-blue Mercedes of hers worked on. The first 'serious' person in her life, she let drop in oblique conversation—Took Harriett under her wing—Balls like a man coming off like a lady. *There* was a nervy one, alright—Coming right into the house like nobody's business—Confident as hell, pulling her Vassar crap on me—Oh yes, a Vassar girl, don't you know—Had that expensive house in Boca and there we were in a goddamned cracker shack—Trying to stump me on the fine points of Alcaeus—Had to put her in her fucking place, nervy lesbian. And poor Kathleen forced to put on a gracious face—Trying to talk herself into some kind of hollow compliments for this one—How worldly and sophisticated she was. How cultured—Christ Almighty . . . putting my Kathleen through that . . .

Who knows where she was shacking up here and there right out of high school. Her mother couldn't keep up the tuition at Tobe-Coburn in the city; Besides, Kathleen suspected her main interest in the school was the fact that it was all girls.

16: Discovers Penelope's.

That's when she fell in with her first set of hardcore lesbians—high rollers in the City—and immersed in that tantalizing world she had heard about only through cloaked comments and innuendo when growing up out on the Island.

In no time, she was a regular face at all the in-spots in the Village and the Upper West Side; especially a sheik little piano bar called Penelope's. In no time at all Penelope had introduced her to Elaine who ran an exclusive, word-of-mouth escort service catering to rich businessmen, international politicians and executives who had a penchant for lesbians, and an even smaller subset who paid double and insisted on young ones. Harriett was a natural and didn't mind a bit behaving with the demeanor which said: This lovely evening out to a show and midnight dinner at posh after-theatre spot was intellectual, demure and most socially appropriate---simply delightful. The highroad attitude seemed one with her breeding and manner. It took absolutely no inventing or rearranging of scruples. Elaine had never seen anything like it. She was falling for Hadi, which of course was breaking her first and most cardinal rule. But the eighteen-year-old was in over her head and didn't even realize it.

At first she enjoyed the special attention showered on her by Elaine; the elegant late dinners in the private booths at Penelope's; mesmerized by the low din of chatter, laughs, clinking cocktail glasses and the lush piano tones raised up inside the horseshoe-shaped padded bar. The dark atmosphere was washed by the residue of pink spots angled down in brushed-gold aluminum fixtures.

"Here, Hadi, I have my own little way to dip in the butter—then a dab of hollandaise . . . Here, baby, Mama's going to feed you the best broiled lobster in the city . . . And Pete—let's have another bottle of Dom. Thanks sweetheart."

It was all great fun until Hadi spent the night with Deidre—a new face in the club, a naive, distinctive-faced dark beauty—one Saturday night when

Elaine was out of town. Later in the week, when she had her new girlfriend over to spend the night again, her apartment door was opened from the outside by key. She heard the deadbolt turn from the bedroom. Petrified, the two girls lay in bed motionless. Three dark silhouettes calmly entered the bedroom, drawing closer and closer. One stood looming over the foot of the bed and the other two stood directly above her. She instinctively remained very calm and cool. “Yes, and just what is it that I can do for you gentleman this evening?”

“Well, first, Harriett, I’m not a gentleman,” the tall, broad shouldered figure in black cashmere overcoat said in a low woman’s voice, “But my other two associates here, are. Harriett, get out of bed please—now. And go into the living room.”

Humiliated and freezing cold with fear, she quickly got out of bed and left the room, wrapping the first thing her hand could grab over her shoulders.

The door closed and the beating of Deidra began. It seemed like it went on forever. The sporadic thuds and strange yelps, the guttural groans and begging for mercy made her think she was going to vomit and warm piss ran down her trembling legs. The three came out of the bedroom and filed past her on their way out. Not a word was said.

It took a few days to escape the City. She methodically mapped out her plan. First, she resumed her midnight dining with Elaine and the topic was never mentioned. From her fun and laughter at dinner, her charm and relaxed manner, you would never have suspected that anything in the world had ever happened.

After two calls to her mother in Pompano, the next day around noon she got in her TR-3, parked curbside in front of the brownstone, with nothing other than all her cash and jewelry, and the Victorian cut-crystal hair receiver with sterling lid Grandmother Mull had left her—stuffed in her polo coat pockets. She drove randomly around town, making stops, picking up dry-cleaning, dropping a watchband off to have the clasp repaired at the jeweler, always working her way towards the Holland Tunnel and checking

her mirror constantly. Once she was convinced she hadn't been tailed, she was through the tunnel to hit old Route 1, and on her way south to Florida.

This was her first exhilarating adventure as a daring, self-sufficient young lesbian setting out in the world by the rules she alone had custom scripted to fit her life. She had won this first one and it felt terrific. She marveled at how cunning she was outsmarting the savviest, dangerous old dyke in Manhattan—tapping on the steering wheel of the navy-blue convertible two-seater and singing show tunes with the wind blowing her scarf. She lit cigarette after cigarette with her solid gold butane lighter from Bergdorf's and smiled at herself in the rearview mirror.

She had a certain way she crooked her right arm: heel of her palm pressed onto the steering wheel; fingers flexed back while keeping her cigarette delicately poised between her middle and ring finger—uniquely Hadi.

Welcome to Georgia, the faded bright colors of the billboard read with peaches and blossoms and a smiling waving family in their wood-paneled station wagon.

“Yes, my dear, oh yes—Welcome to Georgia, indeed.”

17: *The Curse of Frankenstein.*

Back then the boys were still at an age which let them easily adapt to any new twist the family might take, including the abrupt moves from one living arrangement to another once they landed down in Pompano. Before the move they knew but one home—their old Mount Sinai poultry farm on the Sound. But once the Florida odyssey came about Richard and Aleck were like any other children holding securely to the core of the primal unit; and no matter how unfamiliar the surroundings or rapid the changes around them, they remained insulated within.

It's important to point out, however, and especially when he was that young, that Aleck was a very impressionable little boy (high-strung, always on stage and wanting to entertain the grownups.) He possessed an uncanny confidence, that of an adult. But upon their move into Lillian's his runaway imagination collided with dark Gothic in the house P.T. Barnum built perched on the wooded knoll, and it shook that confidence to its foundation. Port Jefferson itself contributed with an indelible residue, an air of ghostly past.

The house was of a by-gone century, and by 1920 the town acknowledged it was time for upgrades to the wealthy neighborhood. Port Jefferson Town Hall was to put their best foot forward. Sidewalks were installed on both sides of the street, this, in spite of the fact that the downhill side of Barnum was a steep drop-off of wooded hillside. The terrain had only been suitable for building towards the top where it began leveling out, and by 1900 all buildable lots were taken up by either new, large Victorians or grand Georgian red brick homes.

The neighborhood also got municipal-pour concrete steps—built to endure beyond the war and subsequent quiet war in Korea—with staggered landings leading from the new sidewalks up to the grade of each front lawn. Iron pipe railings completed the staircases (nothing fancy, the mayor didn't want to be accused of playing favorites to his rich friends), and some

residents did see to it that custom ornamental ironwork was fabricated to their taste. From here, most constructed wide wooden steps completing the climb up to the wrap-around covered porches with formal front entrance.

The house built by The World's Greatest Showman rose to three stories that included the multiple gables and steep slate roof. The front elevation featured a protruding corner tower, complete with curved glass windows and capped with a cone-shaped roof. Most families on the Avenue had a housekeeper, or nanny, and often a live-in cook with their room on the third floor with a stark back staircase up to their quarters.

The family was—by virtue of the wealthy liquor store owner's generosity—to be bivouacked at the very highest level of the old Victorian. The servant's backstairs were most convenient to their rooms: narrow; minimal; steep; with cramped landings to accommodate the ungracious right-angle turns. And fitting with their hat-in-hand status, the backstairs seemed the logical choice so as to not create a sense of intrusiveness on their part. Kathleen, however, when especially tight after late-afternoon drinks out at Auntie Doris' on Strong's Neck, made a show of her airs and gracefully swept down the main stairs in the entrance hall—hand extended, gliding the banister before her, using the techniques rehearsed countless times for her entrances in Earl Carroll's Vanities, when a steamy teenage showgirl back in the roaring Chicago days.

The very week the boys were moved into Lillian's third floor, the Gothic milieu accompanying was struck permanently into Aleck's mind as if by repeated bolts of wind-driven, rain-drenched lightning. It was the autumn of '57, and the Brookhaven Movie Theatre in Port Station was showing the freshly released severed limbs of the sensational new Hammer Production: *The Curse of Frankenstein*, starring Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee. He was already a fanatical fan of Karloff and Lugosi in the old black and whites and he was very excited: He had never seen a new horror movie in the theatre—and in color! He had seen the posters behind the glass in the display cases in the lobby of the Brookhaven; and it sure looked great. . .

And besides, this Saturday's matinee was going to be extra special. He was going to the movies with his big brother, Richard, and his brother's friend Johnny Cronkite. He was always trying to tag along with Richard. And he was always being turned away harshly. But he never stopped trying, and this was going to be a great day. He couldn't wait to get seated in front of the big screen, wrapped in the dark with the smells of popcorn and ice cream sandwiches.

But once they had settled in and the movie started he soon realized there was something different, something new. The British-made film had a style, a sense of realism he wasn't familiar with; and as the movie played on, he was not comfortable with either: Doctor Frankenstein needs a brain for his man that he's putting together. He coldly pushes the gentle, lovable wise old professor with Austrian accent over the balcony to his death and plans to steal the old man's brain after the funeral. The next scene has our dead professor laid out in his coffin in peach-colored frilly chiffon cuffs and collar. Its sense of reality begins to cause Aleck a charged sensation he has never felt before—and yet; it seemed to have something . . . something vaguely in common with that which he was put through almost every night—late at night, about midnight, when it was happening downstairs.

In the laboratory limbs and body parts with their dark crimson freshness are disgusting and terrifying, and, fantastically real! Dr. Frankenstein's man is suspended upright in a giant glass cylinder full of glowing yellow-briny liquid giving his bandaged wrappings a queasy, waterlogged sensation of wet wound dressings. Aleck turns to his brother and lets him know he doesn't know what to do. Richard tells him to be quiet and that it's only a movie. The experience of being taken into a white tile-walled laboratory with bodies on the metal tables and drain boards for blood and fresh death and red flesh everywhere sent Aleck into a waking state of surrealist shock. He was trapped and it was only getting worse.

The man was brought to life and once his bandages were ripped off to startling cinematic close-up and shrieking orchestral soundtrack, Aleck was

instantly traumatized by a face which was not too far beyond a terribly disfigured, horrifyingly ugly, *real* person.

The believability of the pieced-together man, the lack of fantasy or exaggeration, created for the nine-year-old an image which was horrifying beyond his being able to comprehend. He couldn't tell if he was sleeping or awake. He could barely get up out of his seat to make his way up the aisle and into the lobby. He tried to sit on a sofa in the lounge but had to keep moving. He paced while trying to catch his breath which felt as though it was impossible to inhale enough air. He shook and sobbed, embarrassed to be seen by anyone. He desperately wanted someone to help him, but strangely, seemed to be invisible. No one would look at him. He wanted an adult to look at him and help him but was totally alone. Trapped in his own terror.

That night, in bed up in the empty garret bedroom, the white floor and walls recreated the cold laboratory and its antiseptic air. He longed to escape the corpses and pieces of bodies in Technicolor when he closed his eyes. He sensed, and heard, and thought he could see every remote, sealed-off pocket untouched by sunlight, in the huge old structure dark and strange to him. Why couldn't he be back in his wonderful little room, upstairs, at home in Mount Sinai—

Unable to withstand any more, he went to the room his mother was sleeping in down the hall. Kathleen had been drinking rye bombs with Auntie Doris all afternoon. Aleck climbed into her bed quivering with fear while muttering '*please*' to his mother—She sneered at his fear: "Oh, what's your problem; what's wrong with you? Must you be such a ninny? I need to sleep. Go back to your bed." He was shocked. It was a reaction he never would have expected from his mother who fussed over him always with doting affection—And it came at the worst possible moment: He was trapped in Baron von Frankenstein's blood-spattered laboratory and his greatest hope for refuge became taunting part of his waking nightmare. Kathleen fell back asleep while Aleck remained pressed to her side trembling, unable to get warm. So began their stay in Lillian's house.

What a different and strange place it was to him. Sunny blue and gold Florida seemed a comforting recent memory. He was hesitant to wander much beyond the immediate boundary of the drawbridge he envisioned in his head; but was aware that a stone's throw down the hill from Lillian's, flanked by sapling maple woods on both sides, was the entrance to Port Jeff High's long driveway where he had seen his sister graduate a few years earlier—directly across from the rear service bays of Giles Chevrolet at the south end of Main Street, where the Chevy showroom windows ended and inviting houses and lawns began the climb back up to Port Station towards home—And although no one particular recollection, passing that house years later brings on a mood of its very own: Barnum Avenue brimmed with expressionist dark shadows on the wooded hillside, raised-up, above the seafarer's harbor with glimpses of Bridgeport's distant shore on the horizon.

18: The Washington Square year.

That was that delightful period when he led two distinctly different lives, in two distinctly different worlds the distance of a suspended train ride apart. It was his own variation on the charming little Guinness film: *Captain's Paradise*; with the Long Island Railroad standing in for the Captain's coal-fired ferryboat between British Gibraltar and Spanish Morocco: Weekdays, under the most sincere pretense of getting the book written, he shares a bohemian garden apartment on Washington Square with his agent, Jacques Chambrun, along with Jacque's cavalcade of beautiful young New Yorker girls. . . While weekends, it's out to Port Jeff to his family and all that is wholesome and revitalizing.

He had moved back from Pompano to develop the project with Jacques. His last-ditch retreat back north to the City was a gamble which left the family stranded in Florida. He was at the end of his rope, but miraculously, ended up landing on his feet when Jacques cinched the contract with Bennett Cerf at Random House. The promotional angel of the new book was to be Paul Di Donato's sensational literary return with this sizzling-hot new novel.

He had met Cerf at a cocktail party before the move south. A year-and-a-half later he was finishing up the Mediterranean-style beachfront house he had designed for the genuine Italian aristocrat Count Andrea Soranzo of Milan—Cerf hadn't forgotten the pitch Paul had spun him off the top of his head after his third scotch and contacted Jacques expressing interest in Di Donato's characters. Jacques rang up Paul in Florida and told him in his best French accent: "Paolo, you must come to New York without delay. You will stay with me at the Washington Square apartment—you will love it! We have nature all around—you will see. You do not worry but you must be here if this book is to be published. You cannot be in the other end of the country—No? You must be here with me and we sign the contract with Bennett. . . Is this not what you are pleased by?"

It was the break he desperately needed. And what a Godsend having the powerhouse editor personally at the helm. Paul settled in easily; he didn't need much and he liked it that way—Spartan, that's the way a man should live. His little room at the rear of the apartment looked out into their hidden world of grasses, weeds, shrubs, paths of cobble pavers, trees, a small fountain and a concrete Saint Francis holding a birdbath. His beat-up Smith Corona portable was unpacked and quickly functional with a fresh ribbon and sheet of typing paper lined up and margins set. He was a writer in an infinitesimal cubby of the City of James; and he mustn't forget O. Henry! He knew he had something and who else could capture the New York-ness of it all better than he. . .

The two speculated well into the night over quite decent bottles of Beaujolais and Cuban cigars, as to why this guy—perfect gentleman, moral good-guy, butter-wouldn't-melt-in-his-mouth Bennet Cerf—would be so intrigued by his story about a man's deranged sexual obsession over a beautiful young widow he had met by casual liaison, her having come from her much older husband's funeral Upstate, ultimately marrying to a near disastrous, and certainly tortured, end; an end that, by a razor-thin margin, escapes, emerging into the sunlight by their forgiveness of self and each other.

“Paolo,” Jacques would say, “I believe Bennett desires to tantalize via your life. Editorial vicariousness, if it pleases you. What could be wrong when satisfying his secret that is needed while to create the best seller? Why, remember his eyes they light up when he hears your title, *This Woman*? Your every-man, tormented in his dreams—Ecco! *This Woman* . . . This is the bank he is on! Bennett is the genius of the pulse of the American male.”

“My dear Jacques. I've got a theory. What if he's had it with the same stodgy old crap. What if he secretly wants to shock them all? I can give him the raw potboiler that says maybe I'm not the guy you thought all along.”

Paul sips generously from his half-pint Ball Jar wine glass. It gives him an authentic peasant feeling. “—Can you blame the poor sonofabitch? The truth be known, at this point, I'd give him an Armenian jug-fucker in Macy's window if that's what he wants to get this contract.

“Hell, Bennett’s got me pegged. He knows my pathetic inability to reconcile old Harry makes for plenty of juicy stuff—Nothing redder hot than jealousy, *or* a widow, for that matter; he knows the public loves to read about balled-up, weak characters caught up in a web of their own making; they know the poor sonofabitch will never wise up and find his way out . . . Makes them feel better about their own shitass, humdrum lives.”

Their summer evenings were spent out on the back patio drinking wine with accompanying plates of linguine and char-broiled cod steaks direct from the Fulton Fish Market just blocks away. Although surrounded by vertical masonry, the rear of the brownstone’s sunken-level apartment encompassed an overgrown world of random flowering shrubs, tall grasses, a few Japanese maple and a multi-trunked volunteer white birch reaching up to the neighbor’s third story windows. It was sheer prestidigitation; you quickly forgot you were deep in the metropolitan world of the City’s granite-carved borough.

What better hideaway to bring arty, bohemian young lovelies, models, liberated career girls, musicians, dancers and actresses alike. . . Jacques placed plumber’s candles throughout the flora and saw to it that the wine rack was well stocked. While out on the sidewalk, two steps down put you at the black iron gate matching the curved and twisted ironwork on the welled windows of Washington Square.

Before the dinner guests arrived he stacked his mix of French jazz, Italian opera and the latest Broadway musicals on the record changer—The atmospherics and laughter soared. The evenings commenced.

The Jamesian literariness of the neighborhood appealed to him greatly. Still summer evenings, the streets lined with broad-leafed trees and original carriage gas lamps converted to electric bulb by Edison’s own crew, put him in just the frame of mind he needed, while at times even ashamed to have thoughts that he could go on indefinitely, stay in this hidden life forever; his family out on the Island becoming more and more of some distant, but most sentimental recollection.

He told himself this was the place he could write—away from the daily problems and bills, the fighting of the two boys and headaches of family, away from the drunken scenes with his Kathleen. —And, by the way, just exactly who was responsible for those trapped-in-hell nightly scenes? What normal man wouldn't recoil in horror the morning after *even one* such shameful incident? Have you turned out to be the man you believed yourself to be—really? Do you even know the stupid, boring sonofabitch who repeats the same tired crap night after night after night? —Oh, I'm so in love with you I'm going to prove it by draining my blood right here on the kitchen floor for the two-thousandth fucking time because how, how could you have done it? How could you have gone and fucked the old fellow; and even before him, spread for guys in Chicago at the Rainbow Room when you were just a girl. How could you have gone ahead and casually thrown away the virginity that was mine and mine alone! —My Messalina, you betrayed my love—spat on it. When I was away you lined up every fornicator in Rome: senators; actors; poets; rich merchants; bureaucrats; military men; politicians; Rome's elite, and you spread for each and every one of them waiting in line, a line stretching down the hall of the imperial palace to your chamber!—your once-innocent, unsullied vagina overflowing with the filth of all those exiting drained shaking their head in disbelief. —Unlike Claudius, though, I haven't the courage to cut off your head . . . Or, maybe I should subscribe to one crazy Jew or another to get to the bottom of this mess—Mother's bleeding genitals signified by ravenous locks turned to snakes, the power Annunziata holds over me that I may be swallowed back up by my mother's womb—Perhaps it is *you*, Annunziata, who must be beheaded that my fragile psyche may be freed from your devouring, frightening power, thereby reclaiming, uncastrated, my rightful manhood. . . I renounce my guilt for secretly rejoicing in my long-awaited freedom as you died in my arms, finally free to savor as many delicious Rose O'Malleys as I wished . . . Dearest Mother, this does not mean that I do not love thee! This is all neurotic, crazy doubletalk. Think nothing of it, dearest, think nothing of it. . .

19: Paul agonizes over father, Kathleen, etc.—

Christ! What really is the problem here? You act like she's the first woman in the world to become a widow, coining the filthy term just so you could use it in your pulpy stories—although it does make for good material, “—the widow of the old white-haired, bespectacled perfect-gentleman manager of The New Ionia Hotel, Harry, who still had his old army buddies from the First World War and they all wore the same identical fucking pinky rings—Harry, who changed his suits from afternoon brown to after-five blue serge, to dinner jacket and black tie for champagne dinners in the Erie Room with deco décor and floor show—and, of course, cocktails in the Onondaga Lounge, dimly reflected by subdued earth tones of the murals his beautiful young wife commissioned in the naturalist themes of the Hudson River School.”

This Woman was the woman nothing in his previous life could have prepared him for. She shattered all his preconceptions and fit in nowhere. The skinny guttersnipe knew very little of the world of the beautiful all-American, the DAR who was anything *but* a Guinea, or a Pollock, or a Mick, or an Armenian, or a Hun, or a Slav, or a Greek, or a Russian Jew; a girl full of the airs of the self-confident blueblood whose only contact with an Italian had been at the fruit stand on a Chicago sidewalk. What could she, having been pampered by her nanny and groomed by her neurotic stage mother since a little girl, possibly have in common with him?

Of women his sisters and mother, in their tenement kitchen, had schooled him well: She is to be one well versed in the Old-World role of a bride who brings a family blessed with happiness through chastity—While the countless brutal jobsites he had grown up on taught the other side of the coin: a two-dimensional cartoon of workingman vulgarity.

But that was the conundrum. What exactly was it about ‘one meets two results in three’—the completed triangle which he is so hopelessly unable to deconstruct? The third equal side and base of that triangle being Geremio

himself, the dead father. *His* was the life a man was meant to live whether in Vasto or on the teaming streets of Hoboken: direct; natural; charming; uncomplicated; spontaneous; and most importantly—guilt free.

He compulsively compared himself to his father. He knew full well that asking himself how his father would have handled the widow Mull was an affront to his own life, but like a weakling, went right ahead and asked.

His father had had a genuine American woman, Corinne; and he saw to it that Paul and the other kids called her “Godmother Corinne.” He remembers that as if it were yesterday. He also admits to himself that he liked Godmother Corinne very much; and clamored at every chance to accompany his father to her big, clean, crisply painted house with expansive shady front porch.

Best of all, maybe they’d be going out in her beautiful canary-yellow open roadster with the rumble seat for him back by the spare tire. Corinne was blond, full, rosy, meticulously groomed, pampered, wealthy, and thoroughly modern. She was an independent spirit with an insipid husband. Her home was one of the perfectly maintained Victorians behind iron fencing on a maple-shaded residential street in a fine American neighborhood, up on the Palisades over the Hudson.

And that’s how Geremio introduced Corinne to Annunziata: as a rich American, as the stage actress who believed in his talent and future in vaudeville. She took him under her wing. They worked up their song-and-dance routines as Jerry & Cory, “Hoboken’s Favorite Sweethearts,” on stage at the Lincoln. And Hoboken loved them. He’ll never forget the night they brought the house down with their big finale—his father in dapper pearl-gray suit with black piping, matching kid gloves, spates and gold-headed black cane, the two doing a shimmy-shake dance to wildly-popular Creole Jazz Band accompaniment.

Yes, Kathleen Alexandria Dean embodied everything untouchably divine—every scent, every swish of cool silk which he had previously only

watched from afar or, caught the aroma of in passing on Fifth Avenue on his way to the subway powdered with cement dust after a day on the scaffolds.

You've been found out. You're just a bad actor in a B movie. Turns out the celebrity author is just a bricklayer from Hoboken after all.

20: View of the Sound.

Thumping over those tracks signals entering that little satellite village to Port Jefferson proper down below. The pleasing slope that culminated at the marina with its docks and piers of pleasure boats lay straight ahead—A portion of the harbor's shoreline, over by the lighting company, is taken up by clusters of silver Esso oil tanks with swirled metal steps up to the top of each. It gives Port Jeff an authentic, blue collar air, a real American working port, albeit on a miniature scale, with a busy ferry line since the late 1800s.

Upper Port also meant that first panoramic vista which lay beyond the descent to sea level. One could easily make out the outermost boundaries of the harbor enclosed by the long white sandbar, Whitehall, punctuated by the dark jetties delineating the channel entrance. If he took it in unconsciously, the eyes played tricks and the scene shifted to a Fauvist oil-on-canvas in which perspective flattened, all elements stacked, and the harbor could spill out onto his dashboard.

With the jetties built, the channel could be dredged to accommodate small, oil-laden tankers and coal barges to fire the furnaces of the Long Island Lighting Company's steam turbines. Aleck remembers when there was only one cream-colored brick smokestack attached to the factory-like utility on the hillside. (He had always viewed the place as around-the-clock industrial mysterious in nature with its chain-link fences, blinding flood lights and guard booth at the main gate—what if it housed top secret atomic experiments like Brookhaven Lab where Tina Conard's dad worked!) The company's wharf, built to dock those tankers and barges, extended the facility out over the rising and lowering tide of the harbor's surface.

By the early sixties a second, and then a third, much larger modern stack of poured gray concrete with red and white bands, topped with blinking red lights, was added as the City's relentless expansion pushed eastward. And this area of the sleepy North Shore—about halfway out the Island's hundred-and-twenty-mile length, it's western reaches narrowly separated from Manhattan by the East River—was sweet and ripe for greedy speculation: It

was to be the era of the modern, all-electric home with “More Leisure Time for All.” Sunken Meadow’s World of Tomorrow had arrived.

Paul knew the story. He could chart in his mind exactly what had happened: Rocky Point and Mount Sinai first attracted the immigrants of the Century’s earliest years back in the 30s; for the most part Italian, Greek, and Polish. By then, they had acquired their own modest house in Brooklyn or Queens, or perhaps Hoboken or Staten Island, after living for years in a cold-water flat upon first arriving. But then, as good fortune was accumulated very slowly year-after-year, a special opportunity arose: They, along with their sons who were now men like themselves, saw that it was possible to own a summer house, farther out; a place in nature out in the country—*la campagna*.

He thinks about his father; how he was robbed of that dream; how the night before he was killed he and Annunziata had gone to the office to sign the contract on their first, very own house—in Brooklyn. Geremio signed his American name, Jerry, and his mother made her X. He remembers, he was just twelve, how his father had let him make the final choice of which house to buy—and then they would have gone on to have what all the other paesanos eventually had. They too most assuredly would have secured their own little paradise away from the borough streets and attached houses—He was a leader in his enclave of *Vastesi* from Abruzzi; as a foreman his charisma drew all; his fellow clansmen followed Geremio onto the scaffolds with trusting loyalty—Uncle Luigi, the Lean, Snout Nose and the others.

And all those wonderful projects that were to never be. How they reached into the families and bound them as one great adventurer in the Golden New America . . . Remember the shipments of beautiful grapes that arrived by train from California each fall . . . how the yearly wine making began in basements and old garages on grassy lots where we played—Tomorrow’s hopes and dreams kept the will alive for Dad to get up for work Monday mornings. Yes! you asked him if you could call him “Dad,” just like the American kids. He beamed with pride . . . Remember?

Talk about buying a small lot in the woods, maybe even with a view of the water, was an endless discussion. The men argued every detail of how best to build their little dream cottage out on Long Island. Some insisted masonry, the only trade they knew, was the best way; but the more practical realized scrap wood could be scavenged here and there, pulled from heaps left over at job sites.

The railroad line on the North Shore took them as far as Port Jefferson; fine for getting the family out to a weekend, but when building was to be done the drive farther east to Mount Sinai, and on to Rocky Point, was a shared system the paesanos devised requiring a reliable car to haul boards, windows, studs, shingles and tarpaper—But no matter that their little getaway was little more than a shack, it was theirs on their very own patch of green far removed from Brooklyn, or Queens, or the Bronx.

And to individualize your little summer castle you needed to do what you did best: mix concrete; pour a patio; build a fireplace, a chimney; design a brick oven, or a stone garden wall out front where the automobiles would park. For this you would become the artisan you've always thought yourself to be, creatively mixing brick, smooth white stones from the beach, shells, colored pieces of glass and hand-split boulders to fit and mortar in place for all passers-by to admire.

Best of all was not having to share a single toilet down the hall with another family. Think! Your very-own country toilet would feature privacy in a shed, beyond prying eyes, far from the gaseous trailings of some other family, surrounded by nature and, most importantly—peace and quiet.

But perhaps God's greatest reward after years of backbreaking labor was to walk to the beach at low tide with rake and pail to dig the sweetest, tenderest pink-fleshed clams in the world—*le vongole*. Yes, it was hard to believe, and at first even harder to admit—these clams were far superior to those of their Adriatic homeland. *Frutti di mare*, which included mussels, winkles and blue-claw crab—shell and all, lovingly prepared and served over their spaghetti at holiday and weekends, was a wholly different event than

simply another dinner at the kitchen table as the week ground on—*This!* was culinary opera. This was sacred ritual. This was the raising of mortal man to mythic stature as he relished the bounty once hoarded solely by Neptune; and the methods of preparation were hotly debated amongst the men on the job as the workweek as Friday drew closer.

These meals, out in their new crudely-built paradise, transform mere bungalow to flaming brazier-lit columned temple from which briny aromas arose . . . garlic, sautéed golden in green oil, moist parsley and basil from garden patch simmering gently in clam broth, steaming black mussels and the rich-tasting winkles—the small, black, saltwater snails plucked from their smooth stones at low tide, simmering in tomato sauce with dried oregano and crushed spicy-hot *pepperoncine*.

Annunziata had schooled the girls well in the kitchen. And Mary, the first born, was already an accomplished cook by the age of fourteen. She timed the spaghetti just right and quickly coated the steaming macaroni with green peasant oil, turning it gently in the huge earthenware mixing bowl along with a few ladles of broth from the saucepan imbuing each chewy strand with the briny, aromatic energy of the tides so mysteriously pushed and pulled through the eons. . . Is it no wonder the heady senses revel in the magnificence, that taste of the sea!

Yes. This and so much more was what his father had been robbed of by a slipshod contractor hungry for the Almighty Capitalist Dollar. But it occurs to him that he was not; he was able to get that dream the paesanos had sought. And this afternoon, as he begins his descent towards the Sound . . . that's all that seems to matter. —No. Wait. That's not it, he admits to himself. It was confessional theatre. One of many over the years—You're alive. You survived.