

Pissing on the hot steam pipe hissed into the hall, creating the acrid odor any kid who grew up in the tenements would never forget. It gave me a feeling of power. It was my way to stink up their lives as they had done to mine.

Never looking back, I tear-assed down the worn marble steps, intently trying to hear if anyone was behind me. But I only heard echoes of myself. I escaped through the twisted, black wrought iron and glass doors, and out into the street, only to be stopped by a wall of rushing snow that filled the air in every direction. Not a footprint, not a mark of any kind, and it was all mine. My eyes touched the round mounds of softness all at the same time.

It was The Bronx of the 1940's, a winter's twilight just before the early rush of workers on their way home from the Simpson Street train station. The streets had become something else -- not the streets I knew. Their hard, concrete angles had begun to melt away, softened by the rolling snow. The world around me didn't exist anymore, only the intimate closeness of the untouched snow. I can still feel my child's feet crunching into the snow as I plowed through its building thickness on my way to the Boulevard. The streets were empty of traffic. What little there was, was silenced by the white fluff, except for the occasional muffled clanging of an invisible trolley.

A flutter of animated colors on the snow drew my attention. I tried to turn my head to see where it was coming from. My head swiveled under the hood of my wool jacket and all I could see was the hollow darkness inside. I tried repeatedly, but the jacket stood its ground and refused to budge. I came to the conclusion that this alien life force and I had to work together. So I turned my whole body and we both moved as one piece towards the origin of the colored lights.

The reflecting colors were coming from a toy store window, which was haphazardly filled with Christmas decorations. Clumps of snow were still clinging to the tips of my

galoshes when I stepped out of the snow and into a slushy, marble-like vestibule between the store windows.

Inside one of the windows was a mechanical Santa Claus, worn and faded. One of Santa's eyes winked as his head dropped spasmodically to his chest. The silent Santa, separated from his laughter, beckoned me to the window. And a wonderful window it was, filled with toys that my sister and I never ever dreamed of owning.

In our home, we never celebrated Christmas, Chanukah, or birthdays. The only time we ever saw any kind of a present was when either of us was sick, and then it would be a coloring book or a joke book.

When I stepped back onto the street, I looked up and saw the thick, rushing flakes falling from the sky and the wind brushed the snow across my face. The street lights carried the white specks to the ground as I continued my trek to the train station. I wore my scarf like a mask wrapped around my face, only showing my eyes and part of my nose. Breathing and re-breathing my hot wet breath sharpened the smell of each store as I passed by. The barber shop and its perfumed tonics. The deli's knishes, kishka, and its spicy garlicky salami, frankfurters, pastrami and corned beef. Then came the bakery where the cakes and breads were all freshly baked behind the swinging doors that led to the back of the store. I could taste the air of warm fragrances that played with my senses.

Strung across the streets along Southern Boulevard, from Westchester Avenue to Hunt's Point Palace, were crispy clear red, green and white lights shaped like stars, dangling above my head. They went way into the distance, getting brighter as they got smaller and closer together. The Boulevard wore them like a promise, a promise that something special was going to happen.

The falling snow had shut out the sky with a gray-white, glowing haze that surrounded the streets and touched the roof tops. It felt like this small section of the city had chunked away from the rest of the world and was the only place that existed. Every store was

dressed with Christmas lights blinking into the outside air. The colored lights and their vivid brilliance bounced off the snowflakes flickering down onto the streets. They sparkled on the snow drifts like shadows of color. Flakes landed on the tip of my nose and melted away. The air smelled fresh and bright. The streets were alive and breathing. Everything tickled my heart.

It was dark by the time I reached the train station and my reserve heat was dissipating. I was beginning to feel the cold. I stood leaning against a steel post at the bottom of the El, with my gloved hands buried deep into my mackinaw pockets, waiting to surprise my Mom. After awhile I wandered over to the Brighton Cafeteria, right next to the station.

The Cafeteria had two entrances that we kids used from time to time as a short cut from Southern Boulevard to the Westchester Avenue side. The busboys in the Cafeteria didn't care much for us cutting through, and chased us when we tried. I had a sneaking suspicion they enjoyed the chase. Eventually, it became a game between them and us. But what an exhilarating game.

Standing outside the Cafeteria windows, I lost myself in the reflections of people and automobiles passing by. When the image of a car reached the wide curve at the corner of the window, it bunched up into a squashed little stubby car that abruptly slowed down to a crawl. Reaching the other side of the curve, it pulled away onto the flat window. It gave the illusion of being larger than it was, and took off like being shot from a rubber band.

Inside the Cafeteria there were old men with gray beards who spent hours sitting at tables over a glass of tea. I swore I could remember seeing one of those men at the same table for days at a time, sitting and reading his yiddish newspaper. Why would any of them want to stay in a lonely place like this and never go home? Were they being held captive by the busboys?

The Cafeteria doors opened, releasing one of the prisoners. Also escaping was the overwhelming odor of a soup kitchen. In those few seconds before the doors closed, I

could hear the hollow echoes of shuffling trays, clanking spoons, forks and glasses – an operetta of sounds vibrating off the tile floors and high ceilings.

Pressing my head against the window gave me a better view of the Cafeteria. The walls were painted with touches of pastel-like reds and yellows, but it was mostly dark green and blue that controlled the mood, muting all the other colors. The long walls were broken into large, rectangular panels outlined in thin molding. Within each panel there was a painted mural. One of the murals was a huge, floating, naked man with round, bulging lumps for muscles and black hair screaming out into space. His body was wrapped around a twisted horn that hid his genitals. His wide open eyes stared wildly down at the opening of the horn, watching fruit flying out from its center.

The painting drew me in. Around the edges of the naked man, a halo of light began to glow and throb, as if he was about to pull away from the wall. He knew I was watching him and his wild eyes turned in my direction, staring back into mine. I tried to turn away, but I could feel him looking at me, forcing me to watch him climb down off the wall. He was coming for me. I jumped away from the window. The cold heat of blood rushed back into my forehead and I ran back to the station, distancing myself from the painting's control.

At the bottom of the station stairs, I heard the growing rumble of an approaching train. Its massive armored cars screeched to a stop and pulled at the wood and steel, causing the platform to lurch forward. The entire station moved under my feet. It was alive, moving on its own. It was as if the train was an insect that had crawled on the station's back, awakening the giant out of its sleep.

The wooden platform above filled with a herd of shuffling feet, rushing to the exits. A flood of people overflowed onto the metal steps. All the men wore hats, but not just hats – they wore fedoras. My eyes squinted and strained, searching between all the bobbing hats that swayed from side to side, bouncing down the steps.

The trains were coming faster now. As soon as one pulled out, another was right behind it. After about the eighth train and still no Mom in sight, I began to worry that I missed her. Maybe somehow she had passed me in the crowd and at this very moment was on her way home without me. What if I left now and she was on the next train? I stood there frozen in my indecision, waiting for just one more train, then another and another. They came and went and not a sign of her anywhere.

Not knowing what to do, I became desperate and thought I had lost her forever. Again, people emptied onto the stairs, but this time I caught a glimpse of her face peeking in and out of the crowd. My Mom's bangs were sticking out from under her red, paisley kerchief and sweeping across her forehead. My whole world lit up.

"Solinue, what are you doing here?" My Mom hugged me with joy and when she held my hand with her firm grip, I became permanently attached to her — she owned me. "Come, I've got to pick up a few tings."

What we called the Triangle, was a group of food stores and outdoor produce stands that were positioned around the streets that formed a triangle around the Simpson Street station. Hunt's Point was my neighborhood. It was the focal point of food from the East Coast to the West Coast, and imported from nations around the world — from the everyday to the exotic. Each store was an adventure in shopping. People came from all over the Bronx just to buy their food there. Shopping was a social contact sport, a daily ritual hunt for fresh food.

There was an Italian store that specialized in noodles. Everywhere, nothing but noodles. Any shape or any size you could think of, each in its own open, wooden bin. There were fish stores that had huge, strange-looking fish. Real live fish, swimming right before my eyes in a large, white tub of water.

It was a different kind of life in the 40's, when business was done on a personal basis, not with strangers who could care less if you shopped there or not. It was a time when

your credit was always good and uncomplicated – they’d just put it on your tab. And if you were late in paying, you weren’t penalized with interest charges. It was a time when shopkeepers catered to your individual needs, like being able to buy only one stick of butter or one egg at a time. Everything then wasn’t bigger than you, or beyond you. The stores were human size, with human contact, with people we knew.

No matter how often I had seen these stores, when I was with my Mother, they were all new again. Each time she brought her fullness of life with her and renewed their vitality. It was like being in the market place for the first time.

My Mom and I stepped into the midst of bickering voices and pressing bodies. Everyone was cueing up to the vegetable stand, afraid to be left with second best. My Mother leaned against the produce stand, searching through the tomatoes.

“Uh-uh, don’t touch the tomados.”

“Vhat ya talking about, I’m not touching.” I pressed close to my Mother’s rough, cloth coat, my cheek snuggled against her firm thigh. I could feel her concentrated energy of warmth radiate and overflow, spilling over me. The Vegetable Man wore a long, white apron that flared out from under his short, tightly-buttoned wool jacket. On his head was a stocking cap, flimsily cocked to one side. His words puffed out in little white clouds of smoke that slowly rose and, for a few seconds, like delicate ghosts, twisted and turned above his head, then dissipated into the night air.

“How many tomados do you want?”

“A pound, and no rotten ones.”

“Hey, I don’t sell rotten tomados.” He plopped the tomatoes on a squeaking metal scale.

My Mom shouted... “You be careful vit dat! I’m paying good money for dat!”

The Vegetable Man shuffled his feet from one foot to the other and banged his hands together, trying to keep warm. He crossed his arms and put his hands under his armpits.

“Dat, ’s nineteen cents.”

My Mom was a little surprised and half-jokingly she teased him, “So much? Veigh it again. Dis time, do me a favor, take your thumb off da scale.”

“What thumb? Come on, Molly, I’ve got other customers.”

“But, nineteen cents. Please, Dahlink, I can’t afford dat much dis veek. Be a sveetheart and do me a favor.”

The vegetable man sighed, “Ok, ok, Molly. What did I charge you last week?”

“Ten cents for a pound.”

We crossed to the other side of Westchester Avenue, to the Jewish Butcher. The store had Hebrew letters crawling around its window, more like abstract designs than letters. I stayed as close as I could to my Mom, trying to hide myself from a chance meeting with my friends. I didn’t want them to see me going into the Jewish Butcher. My friends were Black, Spanish and Irish Catholics who saw these people as freaks -- as I did. They were strange people, with curly ringlets that hung from both sides of their temples, sticking out from under their black fedoras. They wore those hats so often that I thought of them as being a part of their heads.

We walked out of the freezing cold and into the stifling heat of the butcher shop, causing me to percolate under my many layers of clothes. While my Mom was giving her order to the butcher, my attention wandered to an open door leading to a back room. The floor was covered with sawdust and a man in a long, white smock sat on a chair in the middle of the room, holding a dead chicken. The limp chicken would jerk and jump up from his lap as the man yanked, tugged and twisted at the bird’s feathers. The feathers flew into the air in all directions and slowly floated down, resting in a soft pile covering his feet. The few remaining hollow shafts were put under a steady stream of fire that shot out from a narrow, vertical pipe. A column of smoke spiraled around and through itself, spilling out into the room where I was standing and filled it with the distinct odor of burning hair.

The butcher threw a slab of Roumanian Steak onto the butcher's block and, with his knife hovering over the steak, moved it from one end to the other, measuring an imaginary line.

“How much? Here? Here?”

“There! Dat's a good piece.”

The butcher's long, finely-honed knife, worn thin from thousands of sharpenings, lightly touched the steak and effortlessly slid through. He then ripped off a thin layer of the meat's tissue and, with his knife, made quick criss-cross slices, cutting through the sinews of the steak.

Across the way at another table, a third man rolled square pieces of brown wax paper into cone shapes. With a small, wooden spoon he scooped dark, golden mustard out of an open, wood barrel, filled the paper cones and pinched the tops closed. The whole process was done in a continuous motion, filling one cone exactly like the one before. Firmly, but gently, he felt the roundness of each plump cone as he lined them up neatly into a cardboard box. If only I could have one of those cones, so I, too, could touch its roundness the way he did.

My Mother opened her pocketbook to pay the butcher and it exhaled the aroma of Juicy Fruit gum. Then she fumbled through her paper money, which always smelled of perfume. For the longest time, I thought that was the way money was supposed to smell. The heat of the store became unbearable; my pulse throbbed and pounded against my skin. It seemed like we were going to be there all night. I felt my brain would burst if we didn't get out of this place and back into the cold air again.

On our way home, we passed by Loft's candy store and stood on the corner of Southern Boulevard and Westchester Avenue, right by the wooden clubhouse where newspapers were sold and where we waited for the traffic light. I felt safe and warm standing by my Mom, she held my hand in her cold and intense grip.

That night, the Boulevard was more crowded than usual because of the last minute Christmas shoppers and the mad rush for the last Christmas trees. Christmas started later then than now, which made it more spontaneous, immediate and exciting. The Spooner, The Boulevard and Star movie theatres proudly strutted their marquees out towards the street. Flashing lights ran around the movie titles, announcing they knew they were the main reason for the existence of the busy Boulevard. All the stores along the Boulevard were only window dressing for the movie theatres.

My eyes made a full circle around the street and back to my Mom. She was carrying two heavy shopping bags with twine handles that pressed deep into the flesh of her fingers. The creases in her hand turned purple, with white streaks squeezing out from her strained grasp. Looking up to her face, I saw no signs of pain and there were no groans or sighs, not a word of complaint. I remember thinking how strong my Mom must be. Her kerchief framed her flushed, red cheeks, and I followed the lines of her high cheekbones to her nose. It was shaped like a sharp arrow that gracefully pointed to her deep red, thin lips. My God, she was a handsome woman! She was drenched with a natural sexuality that drew men to her like lust-crazed dogs after a bitch in heat. My Mom was also a tough woman, yet she had a child-like innocence reflecting through her luminous, soft blue eyes. And there in her eyes, I saw a sadness that pulled me in and melted my heart.

About halfway to our block, at the shoe repair shop, we met my sister walking towards us. “Millie? What is dis?! Everybody’s meeting me?”

Millie looked up into my Mom’s face and wrapped her arms around her waist. Mom put the packages down and caressed Millie’s hair, straightened her hat, and we were on our way home again. On the Hoe Avenue corner of our block, in front of the Chester Drug Store, was a man standing by a pushcart. The cart itself was a metal stove with two doors at its front, one on top of the other. Four spoked wooden wheels were connected to the side of the metal stove and on top, at the far end, was a smoking chimney.

Millie asked... “Mom, can I have a sweet potato...Please?”

“You’ll be too full for supper.”

“I promise I’ll eat all of my supper. Please?”

“Ok...Why not, it’s oily yet. You too, Solinue? You vant?”

My eyes widened and I nodded, “U-huh!”

We approached the cart and watched the Sweet Potato Man taking a handful of broken crate pieces out of the box attached to the side of his cart. He snapped a piece of wood over his knee and used it to open the lever on the bottom door. The door swung open and a few lazy sparks trickled out. The Sweet Potato Man gingerly placed the wood pieces on the red hot embers in the oven. As he fed the fire, the hungry flames reached out for his hands. He pulled back and waited for the flames to subside. Again, he placed splinters of wood on the fire and, once more, the flames ignited.

We watched as this game unfolded between the Sweet Potato Man and the fire in which both players win, the fire gets fed and the Sweet Potato Man gets his sweet potatoes cooked.

My Mom asked for...”Two sweet potatoes, please.”

The man wore cotton gloves with the finger tips cut off and his bare fingers sticking out of the holes. From his pocket he whipped out two pieces of thin glassene paper. With his other hand, he grabbed the handle of the top compartment, which was tightly wrapped in rags, and opened the oven. This time the sparks escaped in a fury, shooting out like excited fire flies that danced above our heads. The snow sucked at the flecks of burning stars that fluttered around us, putting out their firey glow as they disappeared up into the overwhelming numbers of snowflakes.

The Sweet Potato Man took two hot sweet potatoes from the oven and put them each into a glassene paper. “Here, I picked out the best ones just for you.”

The sweet potatoes warmed our hands and the cold air carried their sweet smell, teasing our taste buds. Millie and I bit into the steaming sweetness and its crispy, burnt skin crumpled in and around our mouths.

“It’s still oily yet, I want you to go upstairs and wait for me dere. I won’t be long. I’m going to Abie’s for a few more tings.” (Abe and Moe’s was a small grocery store on the corner of Faille Street and our block.)

My Mother handed one of the packages to Millie, “Sweetheart, you tink you and Solly can carry dis for me?”

Millie, wanting to please her, “Sure, Mommy.” We struggled up three flights of stairs, one step at a time, to our apartment.

Our dog, Spotty, a medium-sized mutt with long, white and red-brown fur, greeted us at the door. She acted as if we had left her alone forever and she would never see us again. Her built up anxieties exploded with joy to see that we hadn’t deserted her after all.

In a wild spurt, Spotty jumped into the air and fell to the ground, groveling and slithering on her stomach, peeing little puddles. Springing up from the floor, she dashed away from us to the other end of the long hall, paused briefly and turned her head in our direction. We could see a knowing look and the building of energy in her eyes as she accelerated for another attack of love.

Just as Millie and I started to wonder what had happened to Mom, the front door opened. It was my Mom, bringing the cold air in with her. She touched me with the fresh, crisp perfume of her cold skin. The brown paper bags crackled on the kitchen table as she emptied their contents. The bags and the food became an extension of her talking hands, unconsciously molding the air around them into deliciously thick, rounded shapes that I loved touching with my eyes.

Millie asks... "Where were you? You were gone for such a long time"

Mom's hand swatted at the air in disgust, trivializing her tardiness. "Ehhh, I met Gertie and ve got talkin' for a few minutes."

She glanced up to the square green electric clock on the kitchen wall... "Oy guttinue! Look at the time. Harold's going to be home any minute." (Harold was a man who lived with us) "I vant youse to go to your rooms and be very quiet. I don't vant any trouble."

Way at the other end of the hall was Millie's room, which faced the front street. The fire escape outside her window was a Balcony Seat to the brimming life which filled her room. At night the street lights were the projector of a child's imagination and Millie's room became the magic room of shadows chasing shadows, up the walls and across the ceiling.

All the other rooms in our apartment were off to one side of a long hall, except for Harold and Mom's room, which hooked to the left end of the living room, parallel to Millie's room and also facing the front street. Their room didn't seem to belong to the apartment, more like an afterthought of the architect.

After Millie's room came the living room, then the kitchen, and the bathroom. The last room facing the back ally, what my sister referred to as the dungeon, was my room. In my dungeon I would hear cats sound like human baby ghosts, shrieking in hollow, mournful cries during the night. Even with these eerie sounds of the night, my dark dungeon was my sanctuary. There I was alone and didn't have to pretend or work hard, so incredibly hard to protect myself from the wolves with sharp teeth.

As I walked to my room I saw something looming in the dark shadows of the hall, blocking my way. The closer I got to my room, the clearer the shadowy form became. I recognized the little red squares on the back of a monster, a monster named Harold. He was swaying in slow motion, like treading under water, making a great effort to think and

decide where he was. I stopped about five feet away and could see him clearly now in his red checkered, mackinaw jacket that he wore like a second skin.

Struggling to keep his balance, Harold grabbed me with his large, beefy hands to steady himself. The longer he leaned on me, the more I could feel his crushing weight. My legs began to shake and buckle and just as I was about to cave-in, Harold shoved me against the wall. I hit the wall like a limp wet rag.

Harold's alcohol spit sprayed across my face..."Get the fuck out of my way you little, stupid, Jew bastard!" His hand felt like a hammer, one blow would have crushed my thin bones. And whether by accident or intentionally, Harold could have killed me so easily. That was the first time in my life I truly believed I could die. Everything in me wanted my Mom, but I was too afraid to scream for help. An outburst from my scrawny, insignificant self, might be taken by Harold as a personal attack. So I swallowed the lump of fear that was stuck in my throat. It gathered into a hard ball of desperation that pressed against my chest and drew tears from my heart. I didn't make a sound or move a muscle - like you'd react to a mad dog.

Some people, like my Mom, thought Harold a good-looking man, but Millie and I didn't think so. Harold had a square-shaped head with short, tight wavy hair. He was tall, large-boned, thick and muscular. He carried his strength quietly like an unexploded bomb and at any time that bomb could activate and violently explode. We never knew if a word, a gesture, or us just being there, would turn him into the monster he was.

Harold bent forward to lift a couple of paper bags from the floor and tripped over his own drunkenness. His arms thrust out against the hall wall for balance. Taking a deep breath, he lifted one of the packages and grabbed me with his other hand. Looking at the other bag that was still on the floor, he said..."Bring that bag into the kitchen. You hear me!? Yes?...No?...What!?"

Afraid to hear my own voice, I inaudibly whispered, "Uh-huh."

Harold banged and probed the top of my head with his steel-like finger tips “Hellooo? Is anybody there?” In pain, desperate and confused, I answer with a nod.

“Don’t you shake your head at me.” His yellow-stained hands forced my head around. “Look at me when I’m talking to you!”

The tears were swelling in my eyes. I tried to answer but nothing came out. I was choking on my fear.

“What’s the use, why am I even talking to this fucking idiot?” Harold stumbles into the kitchen.

I picked up the bag from the floor and my touch made it come alive. The whole bag began to pulsate in my arms, then popped and snapped against my chest. A hand with teeth broke through the bag. I screamed and dropped the bag on the kitchen floor and watched as another toothed hand broke through, and another, until the entire bag ripped open. Creatures with hard oval bodies sounding like ivory dice clanking together, spilled out all over the floor, scattering in all directions.

“You fuckin stupid, stupid, stupid!...Look at what you did! Can’t you do anything right?! You’ll always be a stupid, asshole Jew!”

Harold rushed to his crabs. Their snapping claws clamped onto one of his fingers, but he was too numb to feel it. Spotty barked and surrounded the crabs. One of them stood its ground, ready to defend itself from this undignified harassment. Spotty walked up to the bold crab and cautiously sniffed around it. The crab snapped at her nose and Spotty jumped back to a safe distance, bravely barking from where she stood.

Harold corralled all the crabs onto the kitchen table and, one by one, dropped them into a pot of boiling water. The remaining crabs on the table started to panic, as if they had heard the tortured cries of the others being boiled alive. The pot was full of squirming crabs tearing at each other, ripping off their claws. When they turned a bright red, nothing

moved, except for the bubbling water that found its way to the surface, filtering through, around and between the crabs.

Harold switched his attention to the other bag and pulled out two towering bottles of Rheingold beer. They stood there above my head, a threat of what to expect for the rest of the night. Harold turned and saw me looking at him. From behind his thin, gold-rimmed glasses, he gave me a loathing stare and started toward me. “Who the Hell are you looking at?!”

Before he reached me, my Mother walked into the kitchen and asked...”Harold, why don’t you trim da tree? Go on, I’ll take care of the crabs. Sollinue, go in the living room and help.”

I didn’t understand, I thought she came into the kitchen to save me and now she was sending me into the living room to be alone with him.

For Millie and me the living room was a no man’s land, a buffer zone between their room and ours. It was very large and sparingly furnished. The largest piece of furniture was a dark maroon, paisley velvet couch. Across the room was a matching chair. Their heavy, dead weight pressed hard against the floral linoleum floor. The room had two windows facing the backyard. And almost lost on the walls were two very small, cheap prints of windjammer ships on a calm sea. That’s all there was.

Oh yes, how could I forget the tall floor lamp standing erect like a sentry, peeking over the maroon chair, looking like a place used for reading. But it was only a prop, because no one ever read in our house.

My sister, Millie, and I watched as Harold set up the Nativity scene under the Christmas tree. Each piece was individually wrapped in colored tissue paper, packed neatly in little square cardboard compartments. He handled them very delicately, as if they were so fragile that by just touching them, he would break them.

My Mom came into the room as Harold started to trim the tree. "Harold, why don't you let da kids help trim da tree?"

He sharply turned to my Mother, "I'm not going to let a couple of cocksucking Jew brats go near my tree!"

"Harold, shush. Don't have such a mouth."

This is my tree, its my Christmas, and I'm not going to have a couple of filthy, Jew Bastards soil my tree by touching it."

Millie and I knew Mom was pushing Harold a little too far and that at any moment he was going to ignite. If she wanted peace in the house, why didn't she leave him alone and let us go to our rooms?

But she continued, "Harold, you're right. It is your Christmas and the children have no presents. Why don't you get them presents?"

Millie and I were relieved when Harold said nothing and continued to decorate his Christmas tree.

"Da kids never get presents."

Why on this particular night did she care about presents when she never did before?
"Come, Harold, it's Christmas. Christmas is for kids. Get dem something."

To my surprise, Harold reluctantly agreed. And then, from out of nowhere, Mom said..."Millie, Solly, go with him and pick someting."

Without hesitating, Millie refused and no matter how insistent my Mother was,

Millie couldn't be budged. I had great respect for my sister's courage and, even if I was two and a half years younger than her, I tried to imitate her by refusing, too. But it didn't do me any good, because I couldn't bear my Mom not loving me for any reason. I couldn't refuse her. She still had that power over me. It was her love and joy of life that kept me alive.

The situation was hopeless. There was nothing I could say or do to change my Mother's mind. All she had to do was insist and I was lost, forced to go with Harold. What had I done to make her punish me like this?

It was after rush hour and there was no one in the street. No movement, nothing. The neighborhood was at a standstill. The wind glanced off my ears, whistling a warning. Each snowflake thundered down, landing like a soft cat's paw. It fell so heavily it dissolved all traces of the manmade streets into undulating waves. The glowing circus of lights was now trapped in between the thick mountains of snow.

From time to time, I saw a few stragglers with last minute presents held tightly under their arms, walking home in the opposite direction. When they passed us by, they puzzled at the sight of a little boy and a drunken man fighting their way out into the blizzard and back towards the Boulevard. I couldn't accept the idea that I was alone with Harold. All I could think of was how much I wanted to be home. But this nightmare had to be played out.

My eyelashes were heavy with frozen flakes of snow and I could hardly see as I fought back my tears. Harold stared down at the snow in front of his feet, never saying a word to me, never looking back to see if I was still with him. All the way to the toy store, the wind carried Harold's resentment into my face.

The clatter of dangling bells over the door made my skin jump as it announced our entry into the toy store. "I'm sorry but I'm closing up."

“Sir, this won’t take long just a couple of minutes of your time,” Harold said in his best polite manner.

“Ok, but make it fast. I’d like to get home before it gets any worse out there.”

“Don’t worry, Sir, I assure you we’ll be gone in a few moments.”

Harold was always the perfect gentleman with strangers and especially with the police. They never suspected he was a cruel bastard.

Realizing we were standing too close together, Harold stepped away in disgust, distancing himself from me. He didn’t want anyone thinking I belonged to him in any way. “Well Stupid, don’t just stand there, hurry up and get something.”

It was almost impossible to imagine that I...Me, Solly, was in a toy store able to pick any toy I wanted. Toys I’d always seen in store windows, but could never own. And here was my once in a lifetime chance, a child’s lifetime, in this child’s lifetime. But because of Harold’s all encompassing hatred of me and my deep fear of him, I’d have given up all these toys in exchange for being home alone in my warm room. I took two small steps into the store and my mind froze. All the toys blended together in a blur.

“Don’t you understand English! I said get something! We don’t have all day, move it!”

I grabbed what was closest to me, a basketball -- a game I didn’t like and never played, or ever wanted to play. The games I loved were street games like slug, handball, box baseball, stick ball, triangle baseball. These were some of the games my friends and I played. All we needed was a cheap, pink Spalden rubber ball; no backboards, hoops, or other things we couldn’t afford.

But there I was, trekking back home in the storm, carrying a bulging sphere a third my size, and with a drunken mass of hate. By this time of night all the stores were closed, leaving a desert of snow in ominous blue shadows. I was lost in this dark and strange

place where there wasn't a single person to be seen – alone with a monster, never to find my way home.

While we were in the store, it had gotten very cold and the freezing cold was another insult to my soul. A hat whipped around the corner of Hoe Avenue, invading the empty street, followed by the silhouette of a man dressed in an overcoat. The stranger's arms and overcoat were flapping in all directions. His twists and turns were dictated by the deep snow. Desperately he screamed out..."Stop my hat! PLEASE HELP ME!

"Whats dis?," said my Mother, looking at the basketball. "Is dat what you pick? My Sollinue, what are you going to do vit dat? Its snowing. Look. Look out da window, it's the middle of Winter. Where are you going to use it? Where's your brains? What am I going to do vit you?"

Mom shook her head, sighed, and with her lips puckered, made quick rhythmical sounds with her tongue, like dripping water from a leaking faucet. "Well, anyway, vait in the living room, I'll finish mit supper."

Mom had spent most of our lives with Harold keeping us kids away from him and now, once again she was sending us into the living room to be with him. Why was she doing this?

My sister and I sat quietly on the couch, cringing, hoping and praying that Christmas Eve would end. Harold walked by, ignoring us, and disappeared behind the French doors leading to his bedroom. He was gone. Millie and I were alone. We looked at each other, sighed, and began to breath again.

Then from Harold's room, we heard him rummaging through dresser drawers, heard doors opening and closing. It all stopped abruptly, followed by a thick silence, as if someone breathed in and forgot to breathe out.

Suddenly and with a lively gait, Harold proudly burst into the living room holding a long, black leather case with a big bump at one end. He opened the case and a golden light glistened out into the room. It was a trombone, with engraved curlicues spiraling up and down and around the instrument. A real trombone, not just a picture of one, or something I saw in the movies. It was real and right in front of me. Looking closer, I noticed that it was in pieces. Each piece was snuggled in its own dark, purple-blue velvet bed. All the pieces smoothly slid together, gently clicking in place.

Harold caressed the slide with soft hands, pushing the paper clip-like shape back and forth in long and quick short strokes. This controlled the deep, bellowing, fart-like sounds vibrating out of the bell shape at its end. After he tuned up, Harold began to play excerpts of music he knew. And in between these abbreviated tunes, he stopped to reminisce about his illustrious career as a musician.

“I played with the big ones. I played with the best of them, the best of the bands. I never had to have an audition, they all heard of me. His eyes glazed over and almost mumbling to himself, Harold’s mind walked through swollen thoughts.

“I had a distinguished reputation. Yeah...a brilliant future...I was respected then.” Harold throbs out of his numb stupor. “Vaudeville! Yes! I played for the big names, like Jack Benny. That’s right, Jack Benny, and others just as great.

My best friend was a songwriter and I was there when he thought of the song... a classic, ‘Yes we Have No Bananas.’ He was my best friend.”

Like his trombone, Harold slid into a different tune. “I’m an educated man, a college graduate. Brilliant. Yes, brilliant. I could have been anything I wanted to be. Do you understand, they respected me. They all respected me. I could have been anything, anything, anything. “Harold stared off to the side, almost crying.

He switched gears again and played another tune. Looking straight at me, he said..."Books, wonderful books of great men, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, "Walden Pond" – "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, it is because he hears a different drummer!"

Harold asked me, "Do you know what I mean?"

The quote and the strange names meant nothing to me. I was only listening to my fear. All I knew was that they were just sound, coming from a face with sticky, white gook at the corners of its eyes and spit that bubbled and pulled from its lips, leaving a thick rim of white coating around the edges of its mouth.

Then, Harold asked me the question he always asked me, over and over again..."How old are you?" It was his subtle way of telling me I was very dumb for my age. By this time I knew it was a rhetorical question, so I didn't answer and turned away. Wrong move.

"You little Prick, look at me when I'm talking to you. Look at me!" His arm shot out like a steam shovel and shoved me deep into the couch, leaving a lingering hurt in my chest. I tried but I couldn't bear to look into Harold's hating eyes. Instead, I concentrated on his forehead. "That's better." Harold put his angry face inches away from mine. "Do you know what I do with my life now? I break my balls in a freezing cold shipyard, lifting as much as two to three hundred pounds everyday. Everyday! For what? A Jew Whore and her little Bastards. You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you? Do you?!"

I was in a desperate dilemma, if I kept silent it would anger him and if I gave the wrong answer he'd kill me.

“Answer me! You stupid little Cocksucker!” My decision was made for me because I had nothing to say. So I said nothing. This infuriated him and he came at me like an angry bull.

Harold grabbed me and his knuckles pressed against my bony chest, pulling at both sides of my shirt and scrunching my shoulders together. “You brainless Shit.”

In the middle of Harold’s tirade, my attention focused on the cigarette that never left his lips. It had burned down almost to his mouth, with a long trail of ash still attached, replacing the cigarette that was once there. Throughout his violent attacks, the ash never fell off. What kept it there? Why didn’t it fall off?

Harold didn’t know what to do with me. My silence frustrated him into a rage, and he threw me to the floor. My situation was hopeless. There was no fight left in me.

Harold grabbed an open bottle of beer next to him and poured it over my head. It flowed down my face and into my eyes. I couldn’t blink fast enough to stop the burning pain. Rubbing my eyes just made it worse. Who could ever have known that a simple thing like beer could hurt so much.

Harold stood Millie and I up against a blank wall in the living room. (Millie smartly realized that this was not the time to rebel) “Hitler. I love that man. A wonderful, brilliant man. He knows the truth. He knows what you really are. You’re not human. You little Jews are filthy animals -- slimy, crawling little roaches. America just doesn’t understand; he doesn’t want our country. All he wants is to help the world to once and for all rid us of you fucking maggots. He’s brilliant! But I don’t think its being done fast enough. I’m afraid the war might end before he finishes the job.”

I couldn’t understand what he meant about the Jews. I didn’t know what Jewish was. All I knew was that I was Jewish. It wasn’t my fault. I had nothing to do with it. It was just a word to me. It could have been just another part of my anatomy, like the arm, the

liver, the lung, the jaw, the Jew. But Harold was an educated man and he seemed to know what a Jew was. And what I was. So, it must be so.

“Whats going on in dere?” Mom rushed in from the kitchen. “Supper is finished and if you want to eat you leave the children alone.

After having worked up a good appetite, Harold walked calmly into the kitchen. Millie and I started for our rooms, what we had done every night since Harold came to live with us, was to eat alone in our rooms.

“Where are you two going? Come, ve’re all going to eat together.” She said it like she was doing us a favor. I sank down into the chair, lost behind the rectangle of the enamel kitchen table. The silence was heavy and full of tension. Millie and I could practically touch each others’ thoughts; we could hear them screaming out for someone to save us. Harold began to pontificate again about his great intelligence, spouting excerpts of books he had read, and once more repeated the quote from “Walden Pond.”

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music...”

While Harold droned on, I thought to myself, ‘Here is a man who talks about books and I’ve never seen him read one. In fact, there wasn’t a single book in the apartment. Not one. And here is a man who tells us that he is a great musician, but never listens to music.’

“Sit up! Don’t slouch. And get your elbows off the table.”

“Harold, let the Boy eat.”

“Eat?! He’ll eat the way I tell him to eat. This is my house and it’s my money that’s paying for that food.”

My Mother retorted...“I also work hard to pay for dat food.”

Harold conveniently ignored what she said and changed the subject back to me. “The little retard eats like a pig. You don’t just eat one thing at a time. You go around your plate like this, (Harold demonstrates.) and you eat a little of everything,”

Harold might have been right, but his seething hate turned my stomach. I didn’t even want to look at the food. But food meant everything to my Mom. She begged me...”Please Solly, eat.”

The phone rang from their bedroom. My Mom went to answer, leaving us alone again with Harold. He looked at me with contempt, his lips pressed tightly together into two thin lines holding back his hatred. In a low voice that sucked back his anger, ”Eat... your...supper.”

:I can’t. I don’t feel good.”

“You think I’m a fool? I know what you’re trying to do. When I say you eat, you eat!”

Harold got up and stood over me. He scooped up a handful of large boiled potato pieces from my plate and ground them into my face, trying to force them down my throat. His yellowed fingers smelled of tobacco and alcohol, mingled with his sweaty hands. He grabbed another handful and mashed them up into my nose and mouth. The potatoes overflowed from my mouth and squeezed through his fingers, crumbling down to the kitchen floor.

Whatever he could not get into me, he continued to smash on my face until I couldn’t catch my breath. I was suffocating and he wouldn’t stop.

My Mother ran into the room. “Harold, what are you doing? You Son of a Bitch, he’s choking!”

I coughed up most of the potatoes except for a small lump that lodged between my nose and throat. Tears ran down my face, My Mother held a handkerchief to my nose..."Blow hard! Quick, blow!" I blew hard and it cleared my passageway. I clung to my Mom like a vise, while I took in trembling gulps of air.

"You could of killed the Boy! He's only eight – a baby. What's wrong vit you? How could you do such tings to a small child? What kind of man are you? Your hands should only fall off!"

"Your little prick is not so innocent. He knows what he did. He's just trying to get away with it."

"What are you talking? Get away vit vhat?"

"Listen Bitch, this is my house and he's going to live by my rules."

"Nooooo! You're just drunk and you're going to leave him alone. Solly, Millie, go to your rooms."

Thank God, at last! Harold pushed my Mom aside and put his face into mine... "Listen, and listen good. If I hear so much as a peep from your room, I'll kill you. That you understand, don't you? Now you little Moron, get to your room like y our Mother said."

Who was this man? Why did he despise me so? Maybe it was true. Maybe I was mentally retarded. Maybe I was horrible, contemptible and ugly. After all, Harold should know...he was an intelligent man.

Behind my closed door, I could hear Harold's deep, guttural whiskey-phlegm, wrenching up his evil self. At that very moment, I felt an irritation in my throat. Breathing in created a tickle that triggered a cough. I tried to smother it with my blanket, but it was no use. A muffled cough escaped from my room. Harold's reaction was swift. He must have been waiting and listening for any excuse to punish me for whatever he

thought I had done to him. He ran down the hall. Each of his steps were like hard blows to my head. The Great Beast broke into my room..."You mother-fuckin' Jew Bastard! Make fun of me will you!"

My Mom was right behind him and stepped between us..."Leave him alone! Don't you touch him!"

Harold warned her..."Get out of my way."

She didn't move. "Christmas, Chrustmas! It's all bullshit isn't it? You Phony! All this love and peace means nothing to you...Harold, if you love me don't do this."

"You Jewess Whore! Get out of my way."

"Harold!"

Harold's eyes narrowed and leered at my Mom..."Last night I kissed and licked your Jewish cunt. Love you? Isn't that enough love for you? Next time you can suck my Christian dick."

"Harold! Harold, please, the children."

Since Harold moved in with us, I developed a system to escape listening to all the garbage that spewed from his educated, Christian mouth. I learned to create a distorted clogging sound in my ears, like the middle of a yawn. I became very proficient at it and in time was able to prolong the pulsating effect that vibrated over and over into my brain. Not only could I dull my hearing, I could also lose all connection to anything outside myself. I couldn't hear or think of anything else but the erratic vibrations in my head.

But it didn't work this time. There was no escaping Harold. He broke through my defenses when he tore my Mother's dress into shreds.

“You’re nothing to me...You and your little fuckin’ retard...Nothing!” He hit me on the head with his concrete knuckles. “The very sight of you makes me sick.”

Harold, enough already. I beg of you.”

Harold was out of control and my Mom tried to run. He grabbed her hair, turned her around and, with his bulging fist, punched her in the stomach, sending her crumbling to the floor.

Mom’s voice was weak and low,...”Please Harold, you’re going to kill me. Please.”

Harold looked down at her and answered with a grunt, turned and walked away exhausted. It felt so natural to hate this man.

A dead, meaty thud shook the apartment. It was Harold, passing out onto the living room floor, next to his Nativity scene. This was the time of the Weekly Collection, our family’s religious ritual. Every Friday and on holidays, Harold would pass out and my Mom would take up the Collection duties by searching Harold’s pants pockets for his pay envelope. If she didn’t, she’d never see that money again.

Harold lay unconscious on the floor, outlined by a puddle of urine and wallowing in his own shit. I closed my door to separate me from the smell of his filth that seeped into my room.

I wore my room like the clothes on my back. The dresser, chair, bed, walls and ceiling were saturated with my energy. Everything in that room carried my scent. It was my room and now was my time. The rest of this night belonged to me. When the lights were on, my room was a safe place.

But later, when the lights were out, I was transported into an impenetrable blackness. This blackness oozed down over my face, engulfing me in its endless nothing. Opening my eyes as wide as I could, I would strain and stare into the thick darkness, but see only the black night flooding back through my eyes and into every corner of my thoughts.

There was an uneasy truce between me and the ominous silence of the pitch black room. After awhile I could sense a presence. There was someone or something in my room with me. I could hear it stirring -- it was watching me. Slowly, it materialized into barely perceptible, fuzzy, agitated dots that connected and formed into distorted threatening phantoms.

The dark shadows would begin to bend and waver in and out of the black ink. Their evolving contours swelled to enormous proportions that hovered above me. Every night they made an appearance and every night they got closer, devouring anything in their path. I would feel their groping hunger pulling me towards them. And every night there was a moment when they were about to reveal themselves to me. and if they did, I knew I would be lost and in their power.

I had only one way to escape and that was under my blanket, my magic shield. With my blanket over my head, I didn't exist. I became invisible to their world. In the crisp smell of clean ironed sheets, my dark brown, bakelite radio and I cuddled together under my blanket tent, creating my own world, safe from their invading eyes.

Turning on the radio was an exciting ritual. Watching the pin-pointed lights of the tubes grow brighter and brighter until their warm golden glow and the odor of the hot tubes heating against the plastic shell, filled my tent. I peeped out from a tiny crack of the corner of my blanket and the radio's light streamed out into the room, sending the monsters back to their world of conditions -- back to a fragile sleep waiting to awake again, always waiting. I closed the breach in my blanket, and I was back in my fortification against evil.

Inside my safe place, I wondered if those beings in the night were really out there, or did they need me to live. Did my energy give them life? I had this sinking feeling I belonged to them. And they were out there in limbo waiting for me to breathe life into them.

Crackle... squeak... crackle... Sensitive to my touch, the radio complained when I turned its dial ever so gently between the static, until I found the show I was searching for.

Looking through the transparent plastic bubble of the radio's rectangular face, I fell into a trance and stared inside the bubble at the musical Emerson trade mark, the illuminated dial and the gold parallel lines that ran like tracks around the edges of the rectangle, holding the station numbers together. To the left of the dial was a woven fabric that spoke to me in sounds that fired my imagination.

This is how I spent the rest of Christmas Eve, with my surrogate family, Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy. I sometimes didn't even understand their jokes. But just hearing their voices every week, grown people laughing and doing fun things together, endeared me to them as intimate friends. I had other favorites like The Shadow, The Lone Ranger, The Green Hornet, Superman, Tom Mix -- a list that went on and on. Each show had its own theme music. I didn't know at the time they were mostly excerpts from classical music, but it meant more to me than the show itself. It thrilled me with great expectations of things to come.

That music became an integral part of me -- as if a nail had been hammered into a young tree and when the tree grew, it grew around the nail and over the years the nail became part of the tree, fused together forever. And that's what the theme music did -- became a part of me, fused together forever. By chance, when I hear that music today, I become that child again, thrilled with the same expectations, but with the melancholy of lost innocence.

Many of the shows weren't that good, in fact some were just terrible, but the basic ideas teased the images in my mind and made the story plots better than they were. The radio made me the creator of my own theatre. I was the writer, director, scene designer, cinematographer and the actors of the play.

Every Christmas, at the end of each program, the actors would step out from the restrictions of their characters and wish me a Merry Christmas and each time they gave me a warm special Christmas of my own.

"My Sollinue, are you asleep?" My Mom's soft, low, deeply rich voice invaded the room and broke into my private, place. I was angry at her for what she put me through with Harold, so I ignored her and pretended to be asleep. Mom sensed that I was faking sleep. She stroked me with her infectious laugh, then gently kissed my forehead. Her warmth penetrated my tense wall of protection, melting it all away and everything was right again.

After all the pain Harold inflicted on me that night, I was still alive. Eventually Harold's violence and my fear became part of me, from living with it day after day, year after year. It never got easier, but just like any other habit, it was a part of my daily routine. I got used to it.

At night, Spotty's nails tapped an uneven rhythm on the linoleum floor, as she strolled through the long hall between Millie's room and mine, sharing her love by sleeping with each of us for part of the night. Late at night, it was Spotty's apartment and we belonged to her. And when all of her possessions were quietly gathered together in the same place, this was when she patrolled the apartment to protect what she owned.

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