SHORT STORY

Glenn Deutsch
The Monkey Version of My Father

I'd never been inside Uncle Melvin's apartment before, but this Sunday afternoon my cousin Joan and I were fetching him while my parents waited in the car. Three deadbolts thumped and a chain jiggled, but he didn't open up. We waited, then I pushed the door open, and Melvin was walking away from us down a hallway. He went into a room, shut that door, and a thin slat of light escaped over the sill.

"Madman," Joan said as we walked in. I glanced at her frizzy red ponytail, at the loose rubber band nesting halfway down. Takes one to know one, I thought but did not say.

We were on our annual pilgrimage to the mental hospital to see my grandmother for the day, and now here my parents had stuck me with a couple of her warm-up acts.

A half wall separated Joan and me from Melvin's living room. The ledge was grimy and held piles of mail, a few matchbooks, a pack of cigarettes and a green glass ashtray from Casa Bianca Ristorante. The living room was as starved for sunlight and cluttered with boxes as an odd lots store on Orchard Street. It was a sunny September day, but only a fine spray of light passed through Melvin's dark drapes. A tower of cigarette cartons, various brands, stood like the back side of a chimney in a far corner of the room, and three tall gray metal shelves lined the longest wall. The shelving held nothing personal, just a dozen boxes of what appeared to be the same brand of new toasters and blenders and transistor radios. Panasonic clock radios, four sealed boxes, again all the same kind, lay near our feet.

"Shut the door already, there's ladybugs," Melvin yelled from the room he'd gone into. He reappeared gripping a windbreaker, pulling out a crumpled cigarette

pack from one of the pockets. Joan and I inched backward. I remember thinking of myself then as a shortstop, of Melvin as a slow roller taking bad hops across his apartment. He came right up to us in the foyer and jerked a Kent into his mouth. "I'm not ready. Gotta smoke."

He reached past me with his right hand, and grabbed a matchbook from the ledge. Switching it to the left, the hand choking the jacket, he tore out a match, but instead of lighting up, he dug in his thumbnails at the fuzzy cardboard root. "Here, I'll show you how to make two matches out of one." Melvin worried the match apart until it had two tails, cracked into the bulbous head, split it, and produced two strips, each ending in a half-round piece of phosphorous.

"I thought matches were free," I said.

"Usually free. But not always. Anyway, it's a good trick. But now let's see if it woiked." He said it like my Aunt Leatrice did. Woiked. My father didn't talk that way. He scratched a half-match across the front-side striker. The skinny little thing flared. "See?" He dropped it like a piece of fuzz into the ashtray.

"Let him try it," Joan told Melvin.

"Not here. Practice at home, then you can show me." He lit the Kent with the other half a match, dropped it into the ashtray, and pocketed the matchbook.

My relatives exhausted me worse than my parents. I started toward the door.

"Wait," Melvin said, "I gotta smoke this in the house. Your father don't like me smoking."

"Matches aren't what you think they are," said Joan.

I turned around.

"Think little pricks that hiss piss. What do they teach you in science?"

"Not that."

Joan was twenty. I'd turned fourteen that month in 1969. She was my second and Melvin's first cousin. Joan didn't seem nearly as pretty as the last time I saw her, on last year's pilgrimage to Creedmoor to see my father's mother. Another weird thing was, she was brilliant, as my father had said, but the other week she'd dropped out of Columbia.

"How 'bout them Mutts?" Melvin asked me as he pulled on his windbreaker. He wore a GEORGE WALLACE FOR PRESIDENT button on the jacket.

"You mean the Mets?" I said, peering over his shoulder into the living room.

"Once a month or more he drives down south and fills the trunk with cigarettes," said Joan.

"Shut up, Joan," Melvin said.

I knew Melvin didn't have a car. "You go with friends?" I asked.

"That's right. Your father has a car, but he don't ever wanna go."

I recognized some of the brands. I asked, "Why do you have all different kinds?"

"How 'bout them Mutts?" Melvin asked me as he pulled on his windbreaker. He wore a GEORGE WALLACE FOR PRESIDENT button on the jacket.

"I buy the cheapest in one Virginia or Carolina or the other," he said. "It's 'cause of the taxes. But if George Wallace had been elected president of the United States of America, I wouldn't have to buy my cigarettes down South. We'd just make all the welfare mothers work!" Melvin clapped and laughed. "Ha, ha, ha."

Melvin ha-ha-ha'd like he once had to learn to laugh, like he saw the word repeated three times in a book and practiced it.

Joan, who'd told my mother in the car that she was dating the mobster Carmine Tramunti, whispered to me: "It's all swag."

She turned to Melvin and asked: "Melvin, are you mobbed up?"

"Ha, ha, ha. That's a good one," he said, thudding his hands together. I laughed at the question too. You just had to look at him to know he couldn't be Mafia. The guy who lived across the street from us on Earl Road, who was always adding onto his house and had a built-in swimming pool, and who made a baby with his wife every year, he could have been in the Mob. But a bachelor runt like Melvin? I saw him as the monkey version of my father. On Melvin, my father's strong jaw jutted too far. Instead of standing six foot, my uncle was five-eight in his nylon socks. He wore old clothes, buttoned his top shirt buttons, and plastered a fringe of hair forward from behind his ears to cover his baldness.

"You're crazier than your mother, you know that?" Melvin told Joan.

I didn't think Melvin could handle much more of Joan's kidding, so I touched her hand and told her to cut it out. It felt like a brotherly act, even though I didn't have a brother or sister and she was older and we were only cousins; but she startled and sucked in her breath, looked at me and said, "We'd have nice-looking children together, you know that, Hal?"

My guts tumbled and a boner crept up the kangaroo pouch of my underwear, even though I knew you shouldn't want to have sex with your cousin. Especially if she's sick in the head.

Her irises were wrong: like blue opals, sparkly but somehow dull. I noticed dandruff on the paisley go-go dress she'd put on to go see my grandmother.

"Melvin," Joan asked now. "Is Carmine coming over?" To me she confided: "He wants to make a stag film. He wants me to be in it. I get to play house with a salami."

"Nut," Melvin said.

Before I could say anything, Melvin skedaddled into the kitchen. He hit a phone—I could hear the bell clang—and he whinnied: "You fuggin' nut!" Joan fished a Kent from a hard pack on the ledge. I couldn't tell if she'd heard or not.

I gave up and left Melvin and Joan in the house. My father was listening to a ballgame on the car radio, staring at the dial instead of talking with my mother. He'd pulled in WBAL from Baltimore, even though we were in Queens and it was daytime. The signal was weak, but as always he seemed able to concentrate through the silences and occasional assaults of static. It was an Orioles-Senators game, and as he often did at night, sitting at the head of our kitchen table, he listened to the play-by-play while picking at his teeth with a tightly rolled cone of newspaper about the length and thickness of a wooden toothpick. He'd tear corners off the *Daily News*—or now that we lived on Long Island, *Newsday*—and make these implements to poke around between his teeth—which were gappy, not his best feature. Sometimes he clucked while he probed.

I came up to my mother's open window and stuck my head in. Her skirt was up slightly, her knees pressing against the glove compartment. My mother's knees looked like humongous peeled potatoes with stubby hairs at the edges, and the oval mesh grille of the radio speaker, which was on the glove box and rimmed in chrome, resembled a giant potato masher. The red and chrome dashboard was topped with pleated vinyl that matched the front and rear seats. On the outside our '63 Lark Regal was boring white.

"Where're Melvin and Joan?" my mother said.

"I need to talk to you," I said. My mother got out and we stood on the patch of yard in front of Melvin's half of the two-family attached home, which, though it happened to be in Jackson Heights, could have been our old house in Fresh Meadows. The people on the other side of Melvin had a Blessed Virgin Mary statue at the top of their lawn. Half the lawns on Melvin's block had little shrines. Some of the Madonnas were sheltered in shells or set under arches like jewels.

I asked: "How many of Uncle Murray's or Sammy's genes do you think I have compared to Grandma Minnie's or Uncle Melvin's? Or Joan's?"

"What are you talking about?" my mother said.

"Melvin's weird. Joan's sick. Dad's parents are both nuts. Why don't we ever see the good relatives?" I'd said "good," but I meant successful, prosperous.

"All your relatives are good," she said. "And besides, why aren't you asking me about my genes? I gave you half of what you got. What, mine don't count all of a sudden? Just because you think your father's family is more 'refined-looking' and I come from 'peasant stock'?" I'd made the mistake recently of saying that while looking at photo albums.

"We see your family all the time," I said. "And anyway, Grandpa doesn't talk about his job, and Grandma, she's a boring guidance counselor. And Leo?" Leo, my mother's brother, had gotten his wife pregnant when they were both eighteen. He worked days as a telephone lineman and nights on the used-car lot where we bought the Lark. And my mother, she'd dropped out of Brooklyn College to marry my father.

"We gave you intelligence and good looks," she said. "And good health. What else could you want? And I also don't see you lacking for anything material."

"But why don't we see the rich relatives like Murray and Sammy?"

"Rich people aren't happier," my mother said. "And what is this with Murray and Sammy? I really don't know what the hell's gotten into you."

"Forget it," I said.

Melvin and Joan finally came out. His hands were jammed inside his pockets and he had on a wool watch cap. He'd shaved between my leaving and now, but had missed the stubble low along his neck. Joan took my mother's hand and together they climbed into the back seat, my mother landing next to me.

"I'll sit in the back, Myra," Melvin said, leaning into the front passenger window.

"Don't be ridiculous," my mother said.

Melvin sat down next to my father, and my father nodded, still looking at the radio as if he could see the game. He turned the key.

"Oriole game," my father said as we pulled away.

"Who's pitching?" Melvin asked.

"Phoebus. They oughta take him out already."

On it went, Melvin, the younger brother, the geek, the contrary clown still wearing a GEORGE WALLACE FOR PRESIDENT button, asking his big brother questions about the game, his work, Mayor Lindsay, President Nixon.

My father didn't ask Melvin a single question on the way to the hospital.

I decided I'd never show my father Melvin's match trick.

From Melvin's it was only ten blocks to the Grand Central Parkway, and we took that east towards my grandmother's hospital. We skirted Shea Stadium, where I hoped I'd see the Orioles play next month in the World Series. I liked them because my father did. He was that type of New Yorker who grew up hating the rich, domineering Yankees; but instead of rooting for the Brooklyn Dodgers, he pulled for the ultimate underdogs in the Yankees' same American League, the St. Louis Browns, who later became the Orioles.

My father drove in the right lane as usual. The Oriole game faded hopelessly, though we drove southeast, and my father put on 1010 WINS, which bored me even though announcers repeatedly promised: "You give us twenty-two minutes, we'll give you the world." B52s were bombing North Vietnam.

"Yoo-hoo, I see the exit," called Joan, "Creedmoor. Creed*less,* if you get the Othello-lo-lo-*BOT*-omy. Except Minnie, she's got a low-*bosomy.*"

"*Thufferin' thuccotash*!" I said under my breath.

"Hockey's a good sport," said Melvin as we turned onto Winchester Boulevard.

"It's shit," my father said.

"No," said Melvin. "You pay once, you get three periods plus a fight."

"I never understood that game," my mother said.

"Fucking morons," my father said. He was a librarian but cursed like a trucker. I wasn't sure if that was his being from Brooklyn or wanting to be a redneck. He'd been listening to country music since happening upon a West Virginia radio station at age six.

As we passed through Creedmoor's main gate, I thought of the Mayan pyramid of Kukulcan at Chichen Itza. For a competition in Mrs. Kellitis' sixth grade class, Larry Jacobs and I had made Kukulcan from a twenty-five-pound bag of self-hardening model clay, centering it on a thick plywood square we had painted dark green and carefully smeared with Elmer's glue and sprinkled with foam grass flakes. We slaughtered Danny Dunphy and Jeff Englemann, friends who had erected Stonehenge on half of an old Ping-Pong table. The coup de grâce was our relief from the Platform of Skulls, which we had molded from our last bar of clay. In our presentation we told the class about how human sacrifice became increasingly important at Chichen Itza. I wondered now if patients were sacrificed in some modern way at Creedmoor, and

whether Creedmoor's architect had Chichen Itza evilly in mind, since the building before us rose in regular giant steps, from low towers at either end toward a central tower, like a horizontally compressed version of Kukulcan. One dotted, even worse, with hundreds of tiny windows, all of them barred.

Instead of parking in a lot, my father stopped in an alley around the back. He shut the engine, and Melvin asked: "What do you want to do with her?" Meaning my grandmother.

My mother answered from the back. "You know, it's late already. Maybe we should just all go out to eat." She'd spoken to the rearview mirror, or so it seemed.

I'm sure she figured my father wouldn't want to drive another thirty miles east to Huntington, then, that night, have to schlep his mother, Melvin and Joan back all over Queens; but still, I said: "Let's bring her home." I was thinking when Grandma Minnie came over she pretty much just sat at the kitchen table, but there was something I liked about that. When she talked, it was usually to my mother, but she smiled at me. Mostly she ate. Borscht or something else liquid. She had only a few teeth.

"Nah," my father said. "Car'd be too crowded for that long a drive. Let's go to the place on Livonia."

We hadn't driven in ages to his old neighborhood, East New York. I liked looking at rows of buildings that belonged either in an Edward Hopper painting or a gangster movie, at walkups where downstairs the windows blurred: BAR AND GRILL DISCOUNT BABY FURNITURE TV REPAIR WHITE OWL BREYER'S THINGS GO BETTER WITH COKE CAT'S PAW PIZZA. I wanted to soak up the intensity of city blocks. Even if I would be smushed in with my crazy relatives. I wanted to see storefronts crammed together the way people crushed together on subways and the city buses. I wanted all I could get of New York before I left for college in Oregon or California or Arizona. As long as I lived in New York, I wanted density. A few cars stopping at a traffic light on Route 110 or Jericho Turnpike: boring. A hundred people pouring into one subway car: that was neat.

The alley dead-ended a few car lengths ahead at three blue dumpsters. I was too young to be allowed in the hospital, so I stayed with my mother while everyone else went to bring Minnie down. The building's back wall was made of bricks so rough and dark red they looked sore. My mother moved to the front passenger seat, lowered her window, and pulled out the ashtray. She took a pack of Larks from her pocketbook. We were in a Lark, she was smoking Larks. I thought it'd be a good idea for Studebaker and the cigarette company to make ads together.

"Ma, what's really wrong with Joan?" I said from behind the driver's seat.

She blew smoke toward the brick wall. I noticed when she drew on the cigarette again that she was leaving a pink imprint on the tan-and-white speckled filter.

"Joan's got emotional problems. I don't want to get into it right now. Your father and I are seeing if we can get her back into school again, not Columbia, but somewhere. Your father might have a connection." My father taught college night courses in library science and recently, after getting his doctorate, had become the coordinator of library and audiovisual services for the Copiague school district.

There were no windows facing the alley, just a dark blue metal sign with white lettering that had been nailed near the double, black hospital exit doors. The sign, about the size of a license plate, was rusted along all four edges, and punctured with rust-outlined holes:

PROTECTED BY THE
WILLIAM J. BURNS
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY
OFFICES IN PRINCIPAL CITIES OF THE WORLD

Maybe around the beginning of ninth grade I was going through my first major identity crisis, and this day in September was the height of it. I looked at my mother. I don't think I'd ever studied her profile before. Now, instead of looking at each other, I could stare into her left eye without her noticing. She looked ahead and smoked. The iris was flecked brown and green. From the way she twitched her lips between drags, from her twitchy frowning motions, I could tell she wanted to be mean, or was angry about something. She wore blue eye shadow and had rouged the smooth skin of her cheeks. A little spit and pink lipstick caked at the corner of her mouth. She liked to change her hair color every so often. Now it was brown frosted blond.

"Joan thinks Melvin's in the Mafia," I said.

"She said that? Oh, for cryin' out loud." My mother glanced back at me. "Your uncle works at the goddamn post office. He never went to college. Grandpa Tobias got him the job after high school. They work at the same goddamn branch." My mother returned her gaze to the windshield.

"Then how come Melvin stacks cartons of cigarettes in his living room?" I said. "And boxes of other stuff, like radios and toasters."

"The cigarettes, he goes to Kentucky, I don't know, because they're cheap there. He's a cheapskate. And the other stuff, he opens bank accounts. Banks give you a toaster when you open an account. Or some other gift. I don't know what any-

body would want with more than one toaster, but he opens accounts—he puts the minimum deposit in, gets the free gift, closes the account. Or he doesn't. Who cares? Maybe he has hundreds of bank accounts; maybe he'll get hit by a truck and no one will know where his money is. I don't ever see him getting married." My mother smoked the cigarette down to the filter and, without stubbing it out in the ashtray, dropped the butt out the window. My father hated the smell of cigarettes. He didn't want any butts in his ashtray. I hoped this one wouldn't roll underneath and that the car didn't leak gas.

"And I don't appreciate your comments about my family," my mother said. "Your father's family is no great shakes, either. I could tell you stories, your hair would stand on end." She pinched another cigarette from the pack. "I never told you," she said, glancing back at me, "but the first time I met your father's parents, I was scared. Here, I thought these people were going to be so elegant, dignified. Highly intelligent. Certainly that's how your father presented himself." She looked straight ahead again. From my angle she looked a little happy now.

"Go ahead, ask your father some time to tell you about how brave he is."

I thought about the time the three of us were in Chinatown and a bum panhandled for money, and my father scared him off. He told the guy, slow and mean: "Git da fuck outta heah before I crack yer fuckin' head wide open." The bum stumbled away without another word. I'd always thought my father had saved us from danger. Now from where I sat I thought maybe he should've given the bum some change.

"You and I like to make fun of Melvin," my mother said, "but when your father and he were teenagers, Melvin strictly got the raw end of the deal. One time, your father and he were walking home from high school. Your father was a block or two behind—he didn't want to be seen walking home with his little brother. Anyway, these tough kids gang up on Melvin. And your father just watched.

"He's always fashioned himself a quote-unquote pacifist. He was such a good pacifist, he pissed his way out of Korea. Did you know that? Out of basic training. He pissed in his bunk every night until they discharged him. Deliberately, he did it. To get out of being in the war."

I didn't see how Korea was different from Vietnam. What was he going to fight for, anyway?

"What was I saying? Oh yeah, these little future *mafiosos* chase him—"

"What for?" I asked. "You never said what for."

"He didn't do anything to provoke them. But anyway, up the stoop they chase him, and there are three of them, and they start punching him, slamming him into

the front door—they're completely knocking his head off. And according to your father, who watched, Melvin never cried. He just grunted every time they hit him.

"If Minnie was there, I'm sure she didn't hear anything. Grandpa Tobias, he must have been working. Leatrice, she had half a day at school that day. She finally comes out and chases them down the block with a baseball bat."

"That's a terrible story," I said.

"So have a little more patience with Melvin," my mother said, turning to face me again. "Be nice to him. He hasn't had the easiest time in life."

My father, Melvin, Joan and Grandma Minnie exited the black double doors. Minnie was shuffling, leaning against Melvin. She wore a flowered housedress, black overcoat and black orthopedic shoes. My mother got out and helped Joan put her into the back seat. I squished against my door, Melvin sat on her other side and Joan got in front between my parents. Minnie settled in with a series of grunts. I petted one of her puffy hands. She and Grandpa Tobias were still married but she didn't wear a wedding ring. She kept her hands before her with just the fingertips touching the coat. Petting her hand was like stroking a puppy. She smelt like pee and wore pink elastic stockings that ended just below her knees. "Hello, Grandma Minnie," I said.

"Huhhh-lo." Then the usual greeting: "How . . . are . . . you-ah . . . graaades?"

I wanted to go to Casa Bianca, which was on Queens Boulevard. They brought out desserts on a cart. My father and I once took Grandpa Tobias there for lunch. But with everyone else on board, it was just as well we were going to Meyer's. There were no waiters or waitresses, just a counter where you ordered and paid, and a few square tables with chairs. Each table was half taken up by stainless steel bowls Meyer's filled with free sour pickles, half-sour pickles, pickled tomatoes, and sauerkraut. In a white bowl by the cash register, matches gave Meyer's number the old-fashioned way: Dickens 6-4464. The New Lots line of the IRT subway was elevated all along Livonia Avenue, and seated, I could see through the restaurant's window, between black Hebrew letters, the underside of the tracks and part of the station platform. The original Fortunoff was just up the street.

We had corned beef sandwiches and Dr. Brown's Cel-Rays, except for Minnie: my parents ordered tomato soup for her and put in ice cubes to cool it down.

When Melvin finished eating he gulped the last of his Cel-Ray, throwing his head back. His Adam's apple bobbling beneath the shaving stubble reminded me of a marching caterpillar.

Melvin put down the can and burped.

"He boips the inevitable boip, he dreams the impossible dream," said Joan.

"What's that?" I asked her.

"Ask him yourself, putz."

"Be nice," my mother said.

My father's key case lay on the table halfway between us. I wondered when he'd let me start the car for the first time, and who'd teach me to drive next year.

"Katz's is better 'an this, but this is good," Melvin said. "Y'ever been to Katz's?"

"'Minette, she likes *le franc?*' I think that's what you really mean," Joan said.

It was on the Lower East Side, I said, the place where signs dating from WWII still hung from ceiling, saying: SEND A SALAMI TO YOUR BOY IN THE ARMY.

"Smart," Melvin said. "You know your real estate. You should be a lawyer like your Uncle Sammy. You could say, 'Objection, your Honor.' You know what that means? Ha, ha, ha. That's what I want to say every time I see your father and mother and you." He clapped, once, hard. It scared me a little. I thought he was about to insult us, but he just went on: "'Objection, your Honor. I object to my brother gettin' the looks, and me only gettin' the charms.' Ha, ha, ha. Ha, ha, ha."

My grandmother was still slurping tomato soup. There were no other customers in the room, but I was sure the people on the el platform could hear her.

Melvin leaned into me and whispered: "Some time I'll tell you about when your father made me take your grandmother here to her doctor appointment. That's right, that's right. Remind me to tell you. The year, 1951. The date, October the thoid."

Of course I knew that date. "Shot heard 'round the world," I said. "Bobby Thomson, Giants and Dodgers, the Polo Grounds. Thomson homers, and the Giants win the pennant, the Giants win the pennant."

"Bottom of the ninth," Melvin said, opening and closing one of Meyer's matchbooks, which he must've taken from the counter when we came in.

"Bottom of the ninth. Ralph Branca inherits a 4-2 lead. Giants win it 5-4."

My grandmother was looking straight down at her soup. My parents were talking with Joan—giving her advice, I guessed. They were seated on either side of her, talking into her ears. She saw me looking. She stabbed one of the little green tomatoes in the bowl with her fork, then lifted the pickled fruit to her mouth.

"Your father," said Melvin, conspiratorially, "he's in Brooklyn College. I'm still in high school. He takes her to these appointments in the city. But not this day."

"What're you two talking about?" my mother asked.

"Nothing," said Melvin. "A story, that's all."

"Not here," my mother said.

"Why not? He's old enough." Melvin hitched a thumb around my chest towards his mother. "She don't understand nothing." He jerked it at Joan across the table. "That one over there—"

Joan was still looking at me, brandishing the sour green tomato.

"I'll hear it later," I said.

My father plunked his empty soda can on the table so hard it sprang back up from the oilcloth. He cupped his keys and backed up his chair. "Let's get going."

"In a minute," my mother said. "Joan is being very cooperative."

"I'll give her two seconds," my father said.

My parents went back to counseling Joan, but Joan continued looking at me. She'd put the fork back down, and the shiny green tomato was locked between her lips. She looked at me harder and sucked it in deeper and then let it out again, just a little. I knew what she was trying to show me. But it also looked like she was making ogre eyelids around a huge green eyeball.

"She squirted me!" I lied. "Who squirted you? With what?" said my mother. "*Bist meshug*?" "Joan, she squirted me with the tomato." "Joan, take the tomato out," my mother said.

"Oww!" I shouted. I bolted upright. "Oww, my eyes!" I squeezed them shut, waited a moment, then dug my palms into the sockets until I saw black-and-white psychedelic patterns.

"What're you doing that for? What's the matter with your eyes?" my mother said.

"What happened?" my father said.

My grandmother mouthed something to herself.

"She squirted me!" I lied.

"Who squirted you? With what?" said my mother. "*Bist meshug*?"

"Joan, she squirted me with the tomato."

"Joan, take the tomato out," my mother said.

"Whaddya talking about, a tomato?" my father said.

Joan took the pickled tomato out of her mouth. "How could I squirt you?" she said. "You idiot, I didn't even bite into it." She put it back in her mouth, but now held it there with two fingers.

"She must've bit it," I said. "I got pickle juice in my eye."

"Well, keep them shut awhile," my mother said. "Let the tears do the work. If it's not better in a few minutes, we'll take you to the hospital."

"I told you," my grandmother said, looking downward. "I told you I had palpitations."

"What'd she say?" my father asked.

"Joan is giving her palpitations," I told him.

"No," my mother said, "you're the one who's gonna give her a heart attack if you don't cut it out, for crissake. Just keep your eyes closed a minute and let's all finish our meal."

"If you examine me, doctor," my grandmother said, "I must open up my blouse."

"Just shut her up," my father said. He looked scared. He tore a small corner off the paper placement that was sticking out from underneath his plate and started rolling it.

Melvin said: "You don't wanna take her back yet. She barely gets out."

"Five more minutes," my mother said. "Five more minutes. She'll stop. And if *he's* not okay by then—"

Meaning me.

"I'll take him outside . . . fresh air," said Melvin. "You wanna go outside?"

"I'll try," I said, opening my eyelids as if they'd been stuck together by pus.

Joan leaned over the table and across my mother and told my grandmother: "Minnie, the doctor's coming later."

My grandmother cocked her head toward Joan. "Later?"

"Later, that's right," my mother said. "We'll leave the two of you alone when he comes. But right now, finish your soup."

My father had slumped in his chair and was now poking at his teeth with the makeshift toothpick. Every once in awhile he clucked.

I squinted, as if the dull light in the deli hurt my eyes. Then I started blinking a lot.

"Meet us in front of Fortunoffs," Melvin told my parents. He looked at his watch. I saw the black color was chipping off the twist band.

My father looked at his watch. "Twenty minutes," he said.

The elevated tracks blocked enough light to make it feel much later in the afternoon, and cool. "You okay?" my uncle asked.

I blinked my eyes a few more times. "Yeah."

"You know, that's some outfit you're wearing."

"Thanks," I said.

"Something a nigg might wear. Ha, ha, ha. Bull's eye! Bully for you, Rufus."

"I'm not prejudiced," I said.

"Remember, the sister got brothers. Remember that, bro. Ha, ha, ha."

A guy was selling knishes from a pushcart across the street in front of Fortunoff. His sign read MOM'S KNISHES. I smelled the potatoes and grease as we stepped into the gutter to cross. Melvin jammed his hands into his windbreaker but took one out as if to take my hand. His knuckles were square. "I'm okay," I said.

"I know that guy," Melvin said. "He's usually outside schools. He comes here weekends."

As we reached the other curb, the knish man, whose name was Ruby, said, "The main dining room is now open." He put a Yiddish newspaper on the chair behind him.

"Potato," my uncle told him.

"Sorry, all I have is kasha."

"Want one?" Melvin asked me.

"I'm going into the store," I said.

"Okay, wait." He paid for his knish, wrinkled down the brown paper wrapper, and glazed the floury skin with yellow mustard. I realized now that Melvin was left-handed like my father. Leaving Ruby to his newspaper, Melvin and I rested our backs against the Fortunoff building. Despite just having eaten lunch, Melvin finished the knish in a few bites. He went back to Ruby for a couple of Sunny Boy orange drinks, and when we'd downed those, Melvin said "ahh" and jerked another Kent into his mouth. The grease on his fingers made the paper translucent. I looked across the street. From where we stood Meyer's looked closed.

"Can I have one of those?" I said.

"You crazy? Your father would kill me. Anyway, you're too young to smoke."

"Ever go to Fortunoff as a kid?" I asked.

"Back then they only sold silver. Now they sell more. Do you like jewelry?"

"Never thought about it," I said.

"Got a girlfriend?"

"Not really."

"When you need jewelry, don't buy it here," Melvin said. "They got better prices than A&S or even Macy's, but you need jewelry, you lemme know foist."

Why, I wanted to know.

"Just ask when you need to."

"Okay. But are we going in?"

"I'm gonna talk to Ruby and smoke another cigarette. You go. I'll be here."

"I'm not that interested in Fortunoff," I told Melvin. "Tell me, what's with Grandma Tobias?"

He looked at his shoes, looked across the street, looked at his watch. "I'll tell you, but only 'cause you should know. But before I do, I want you to stay out of trouble. I mean Joan. Don't get in a room alone with her—she's crazy. Worse."

"I know that," I said.

"Your grandmother," said Melvin. "One time, Leatrice caught her sprinkling Ajax into the meatloaf she was making for dinner. Your father's in college. I lived at home still. Leatrice too, but by then she was engaged. Murray knew a doctor in the city, and we started taking her, your grandmother. For shock treatments. For depression, he called it."

My stomach filled with a feeling like ice water. I thought of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,* which I'd taken from my parents' bookshelf because the title sounded good.

"He was a specialist," Melvin was saying. "Your grandmother, she always had this thing for doctors. She used to think she had a boyfriend who was a doctor. Set a place for him at the table and everything. Talked to him out loud. There was nobody there. You heard her. We couldn't bring no friends over."

I wondered if she had rebelled against something, become someone's outcast, like McMurphy in *Cuckoo's Nest*. I imagined a conspiracy. Turned in by her own three kids and her husband and at least one brother, Sammy or Murray, the future lawyer or doctor, and maybe her sister, Leah. But why? What'd she do wrong?

"The morning of the playoff, Dodgers versus the Giants, your father says to me, 'I can't take her, I gotta finish my midterm.' I'm sure he meant, 'Gotta watch the game.' We didn't have no TV, but there was TV—"

"I know," I said, turning toward Fortunoff's entrance, where a woman in a white outfit, who strongly resembled Miss Ryan, my knockout ninth-grade English teacher, gazed up at the tracks and smoked a cigarette with hard inhales and quick exhales, steaming it like my friends and I did in the boys' room. She ground out the butt and glanced our way before going inside.

"She's a little developed for you," said Melvin.

I felt my face redden to the color of my pants. Then I made a real ass of myself. "Maybe," I said, as if Melvin were my friend, "she liked you." Suddenly I realized how preposterous that sounded, and my face burned like one of the knish man's coals.

Melvin said, "You wanna hear the story, or what?"

I nodded, and Melvin continued: "Anyway, your father says she can't miss the appointment, the doctor's a big shot, you gotta take her. I'll tell ya, she wasn't getting no better. Maybe she'd get better after—that's what we thought.

"After, is she out of it, man oh man. I gave half a thought to bringing her someplace with a TV in the window. I also thought a bar. But she already looked drunk. Like a junkie, really. Like all of a sudden mothers took heroin. She's barely holding her head up, barely has her eyes open. She didn't need no cane, there was nothing wrong with her legs, but she's barely walking. I'm holding her arm. And she's making these sounds, like bluh-bluh-bluh. Muttering, basically.

"I get her on the subway"—he pointed at the tracks overhead—"same train. She falls on my shoulder, asleep. Car's empty. I didn't get no paper, got nothing to read. She saw the doctor at two—we must've got to the subway at three, three-fifteen. Trains are usually jammed at that hour."

"When did the game end?" I asked. "When did he hit the home run?"

"A few minutes before four. Before we got home. Not that I was for the Giants, or the Dodgers either—I was Yankees all the way. But your father saw it. I didn't see it."

I said, "If my father liked the lousy Browns so much, he shouldn't've cared about the good teams."

You entered Fortunoff through a first-floor vestibule and climbed steep, linoleum-covered stairs. The store took up the building's second story, its windows aligning with the elevated tracks. I'd been there before with my parents. Fortunoff was a department store that carried only silverware, china, glassware, linens—things for the home—and jewelry: rings and earrings and bracelets and pins and necklaces and watches on velvet trays in dark-wood-trimmed glass cases big as coffins. A few rows in, I noticed the lady from the street standing behind a case of bracelets. She had on a long white skirt and gold and white flowered top. I turned into her aisle and, facing away, pretended to browse. I looked at baby pearl necklaces and milky white dots set in gold earrings. Finally she said, "That's a groovy sweater you have on."

I turned and faced her. "I picked it out at Macy's." She had pretty eyes and a long, thin nose. I added: "Maybe you could tell me—do you ever see anybody up here that you know."

"Of course," she said. "Regular customers. People I work with. So was that your father outside? Did you two get separated?"

"God no," I said. "That's my uncle. He's a jewel thief. And he's all mobbed up."

"Really?"

"Well, that's what he says. His name is Melvin Tobias."

"I went to school with a Melvin Tobias," said the lady, leaning across the counter.

Her eyes were violet. She had glossy lips. I guessed she was a few years older than Miss Ryan, who, I knew, had only ten years on me.

"Was that Melvin Tobias a little monkey?" I asked.

"What? No, I wouldn't say that."

"Do you remember his older brother, Jack?"

"No, but I was a couple of grades below Melvin."

"Do you think he could be in the Mafia?"

"I wouldn't say that, either. You want to be a *mafioso* when you grow up?" She worked not to smile.

"Nah, more like my father," I said. "Or maybe some uncle I haven't met yet."

Everyone was waiting for me downstairs. My father was a fast walker, took long strides, Melvin and I struggled to keep pace, but we flanked him just the same. At the car, I asked my father, "Was your mother a good cook when you were younger?"

"Who cares?" he said, unlocking his door.

"I was just asking."

My mother and Grandma Minnie waddled up holding Joan's hands.

"Be concerned with you," my father said. "The past is crap."

I said, "What's past is past, or p-a-s-*s*—"

"I got it," my father said.

My mother said, "And this is what you talk about after you eat?"

Melvin said, "They're being funny, Myra. It runs in the family."