

The Color of Character

Glen Shuld

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Dedicated to The Bundtcake

The Color of Character

A Novel by Glen Shuld

Preface

I had a dream. I dreamed I stood slightly to the right and behind Dr. Martin Luther King, at the Lincoln Memorial, on that noteworthy August day in 1963 as he delivered his oft-quoted speech. I looked out over the sea of hopeful, well-intentioned, and earnest black faces that filled the Washington Mall.

I was proud to be there. I knew Mom, Dad, and Grandpa Leo could see me on the TV back home in Michigami, Illinois (a suburb of Chicago). Mom and especially Grandpa were the most socially just persons I knew. Grandpa was a warhorse for the civil rights movement. Grandma was watching too, but she was more concerned with who would clean up the mess left on the mall, “when all those colored people left.”

When Dr. King got to the most familiar part of this nugget of American history, that his “four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character,” I panicked. That was not how we rehearsed it. He left something out. Conscious of the vast, live audience, I subtly cleared my throat, and nudged him a bit, to no effect. He continued on. So I leaned in closer.

“Dr. King.” I whispered with urgency. “You forgot something. You left something out—something important.”

He stopped and slowly turned to look at me with eyes narrowed.

“Dr. King, you forgot to say: *and by their conduct*, remember? You want them not to be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character, *and* by their conduct. Remember how we said it was good alliteration with another word beginning with a ‘c’?”

Remember how I told you that a person's conduct is the first hint we have of a person's character. Sometimes that's all we have a chance to see. Their conduct is a manifestation of their character. You agreed. Remember, Dr. King? That was going to be part of the speech, and that's going to help out a lot of people—black and white—in the future if you include those words.”

But I lost him. He stared past me, as if through a ghost, turned away, and continued where he left off. He said nothing about *conduct*.

“Get off the stage, honky.” “Sit down and shut up, boy.” An older, stern-faced, black woman in the audience, looking and sounding like the strict health teacher in my junior high school, opened a small milk carton, and tossed it at me. Just before the contents spilled on my head, I awoke.

Chapter 1

Sunday, June 19, 2011

“I didn’t take her phone, you white bitch.”

I spun around towards the source of the slur, grabbing Mom’s frail arm simultaneously. A middle-aged white woman in summer tourist garb sat on the sidewalk in front of Tiffany’s on Michigan Avenue. In a daze, she attempted to examine her skinned left knee, exposed by her khaki shorts. It was her phone in question.

To her left, eight black teens, a mix of girls and boys, took turns smacking the head of a white teenage girl who boldly attempted to stop the alleged thief. A black girl was yanking on the white girl’s long blond hair. Yet the white girl held tenaciously to the collar of the much larger black girl who called her a white bitch. She was thrown around like a rodeo rider trying to make eight seconds. The racial epithets continued—all anti-white slurs.

The white, gathering crowd hung back.

“They might have guns.”

“Stay away. They don’t care if they kill you.”

“Animals.”

“Where are the damned police?”

With a surge of adrenaline, I threw my gay, 54 year old ass into the mix, along with two young white men. We tried to break open the black circle that enveloped the white girl whose face and hair were red with blood.

“Racists. You’re all racists. We didn’t do nothing,” one of the black girls screamed at no one in particular.

The accusation of racism ripped open memories, and pumped more adrenaline through my body.

With whistles blowing, the foot patrols rushed in from all sides. The cavalry had finally arrived. Squad cars with blue lights flashing and sirens screaming soon followed, blocking two lanes of southbound traffic along Michigan Avenue.

Chicago had been plagued during recent summers by gangs of black youth (the media reported them to be “urban youth,” to avoid casting aspersions on their race) riding the L from their murderous neighborhoods to the tourist centers, fashionable shops, and popular Northside beaches and parks. Once arrived, they descend on stores en masse, looting and fleeing in the safety of numbers. They attack crowds of unwary pedestrians, knocking them aside, grabbing purses, and phones, and trampling the gardens along the parkway.

In the parks, they block pathways, and knock people off bikes, kicking them as they steal their cell phones, purses, or anything else of value. The same occurs at the beaches. Over the Memorial Day holiday, using the excuse that it was too hot and crowded, the mayor issued an unprecedented order to close one of the most popular beaches. The families who were ushered off the beach didn't have to be told that the heat was a politically correct excuse to shut down what had been a haven from the heat for the past century. The truth could not be comfortably told. The presence of a few hundred black youths victimizing the mostly white beach-goers, overwhelmed the surprised and understaffed police detail assigned to the normally peaceful lakefront.

The masses were sent through the tunnels under Lake Shore Drive, and deposited on the Magnificent Mile and the Gold Coast where the black youth went on a crime spree. They eventually forced the closure of Chicago Avenue where they had invaded a McDonalds on their way to the Red Line subway that would return them to their South Side turf.

As the police attempted to sort the parties involved in the melee in front of Tiffany's, I returned to Mom, and put my arms around her tiny shoulders. Tears streamed down her face. The matter of race in America had been breaking her heart for over forty years. She couldn't cope with the dissonance between the ideals she once held and a worsening reality.

She accompanied me to the police station to give my statement. The alleged muggers were minors, and released to their families, free to come back another day. When relatives showed up to claim their kids, the shouts of racism and police brutality echoed off the metal file cabinets lining the cinderblock walls.

“My boy's a good boy. He don't hurt nobody.”

“Go ahead and blame the black kids when you know it's the white kids.”

“The police are killing our children, and blaming it on gangs.”

My insides knotted. I watched a policeman try to talk to an angry mother as she held out her hand in front of his face, and turned her head away. She was not going to listen to a bigoted, white police officer. The black police officers were called “plantation nig---s,” (although I didn't say it, I'm not comfortable putting it in print).

I escorted Mom outside. We were tense. Violence threatened. Our ears rang with the slurs heaped on everyone by the youths and their families.

We cancelled our plans to walk to the Art Institute, attend the member's preview of the latest exhibit, and then take lunch at a nearby restaurant. We hailed a taxi, and went back to my place. From there, I drove Mom back to her house.

The event garnered no mention on the local evening news, and only a paragraph in the next day's newspapers. There was no mention of the race of the alleged perpetrators or the

victims. The readers' comment section of the online version of the newspaper said what the paper didn't.

“We all know these gangsters are black. Who are you protecting?”

“Where are Al Sharpton, Jessie Jackson, Louis Farrakhan, and the rest of the town criers who would demand public apologies, and lead marches if the perpetrators were white—which they almost never are?”

And most to the point:

“How are we ever going to resolve black white issues if we can't talk about them honestly?”

Ironically timed, a lengthy op-ed piece in the paper opined that white racism did not disappear with the election of President Obama. Why, the author asked, did it remain so intractable? Why did so many whites hold prejudices against their black compatriots?

Chapter 2

1965 - 1969

My first day of third grade was no big deal. It should've been memorable; since it was the day my elementary school was integrated. That morning, there were to be three black students in every classroom. My white classmates and I were indifferent to their color. Our parents had not instilled any fear or suspicion in us—only the usual curiosity about new kids. Were they nice? Smart? Bullies? Athletes? Where did they live? Would they be my friends?

They dressed in what we called birthday party clothes; the kind of clothes you wore to Sunday school. Our regular school clothes were less fancy.

That's the day I met Cleon, Roger, and Linette, nicknamed Etti. Their arrival had been carefully planned over the previous year by the progressive school board that oversaw our district, and by our approving parents.

I lived in Michigami. Our town was newer and more modest than Hampden, its older neighbor to the east. Hampden is the gateway to Chicago's elite north shore and was the home of my new black classmates. Michigami experienced explosive growth after World War II, when returning soldiers, with help from the GI Bill, completed college, and bought newly constructed, modest homes. All of Michigami's residents were white, with a slight Jewish majority. Many of our parents were the first or second generation of their families born in America. Our ancestors were part of Lady Liberty's wretched refuse who fled for their impoverished lives from the violent, anti-Semitic pogroms of the Poles, Lithuanians, Romanians, Hungarians, Russians, the Tsars and the churches.

In spite of American anti-Semitism, which thrived in the 1920s and 1930s of their childhoods, our parents believed America to be the greatest country in the world, and that they were the luckiest Jews since before the Romans conquered Israel. Their deeply rooted religious

belief in social justice was in complete harmony with America's doctrines, at least as they were written.

I'm not sure of the historical reason why our corner of Michigami was assigned to the Hampden school district. This quirk of history created a unique, potentially volatile mix in the junior high school I would attend in a few years. That school comprised Michigami's white Jews, Hampden's minority blacks, and a small percentage of white Gentiles.

For one hundred years, the elegant town of Hampden had a small, segregated black population. They had been the servants who worked in the large homes to their east, and in the other towns that bordered Lake Michigan. These communities lined up along what became the commuter railroad to downtown Chicago as they evolved into the prestigious North Shore.

For nearly a century, Hampden's black community straddled the range of the middle class, and remained in the same neighborhood, confined to segregated schools until high school. There the blacks and whites of Hampden were educated in the massive school with a national reputation for excellence. Within its walls, they remained segregated for decades.

The blacks in my third grade class were the most polite kids I'd ever met. They called our teachers "ma'am," a strange word to our tongues. The boys dressed in white shirts, and Cleon wore a different color "dickey" under his shirt each day. I loved dickeys, (how prophetic). The girls wore frilly dresses, often with black patent leather shoes.

Whether instinctively, or from lessons learned at home, we knew the right thing to do was to approach the new kids, and include them in our playtime. After school, on a warm and windy September day, my best friend Ken and I went over to Cleon's house. It was a day of many firsts. Cleon's was the first home of a black person, a Christian, and a resident of Hampden that I visited.

Like many of the homes in his part of Hampden, Cleon's house was a white clapboard house that looked more like those found in small towns than in large suburbs. Inside, everything was subdued in color and material, with rugs on the hardwood floors instead of wall-to-wall carpeting—décor Mom would've called "Gentile." Today I would call it, "tasteful on a modest budget."

Cleon's mother was young and pretty. She wore a white sleeveless blouse and a tight brown skirt that stopped at her knees. She seemed pleased that Cleon brought us home as she sat us down around her kitchen table, and served us homemade cookies along with milk. I'm not sure what I expected to find, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Cleon had a ping-pong table in his basement, and that's how we spent our afternoon, until Ken and I had to get home for dinner. After that, Cleon was often at my house, and we played with my slot car set. Grandma loved him. She said he was the sweetest little boy I ever brought home. When his mother came to pick him up, she always spent time chatting with Grandma and Mom, who, by that time of day, was usually home from the school where she worked.

During one of those talks, Cleon and I stood next to our respective mothers as Melva, our black housekeeper, passed through the foyer carrying cleaning supplies. Mom's eyes started to dart around betraying some discomfort. The notion of a black woman as a maid was transitioning from a norm to an offensive cliché. If Mrs. Jones only knew how much I loved Melva, and how integral to my family she was, surely she wouldn't see anything undignified about her position.

Trust grew with familiarity. Grandpa got three tickets, so he and I could take one of my friends to a Cubs' game. I asked Roger Parker, a black classmate. Dad honked his horn in front of Roger's house in Hampden that Saturday morning, on his way to drop us off at the L. Roger's mother peered out suspiciously, and then she opened the window.

"What do you want?"

I jumped out of the car, and started towards the front door. “Isn’t Roger coming to the Cubs game with us?” It was Mrs. Parker who was confused. Roger had told her about the invitation earlier in the week, but she told Roger that the white boy was probably playing a joke on him.

“Why would some white boy take you to a Cubs game? I don’t want you to be disappointed when nobody shows up here to take you.” Roger explained this to me later as we rode the L to Wrigley Field.

After a moment, Mrs. Parker smiled from ear to ear, and waved towards the car holding up her index finger to indicate that Roger would be out in one minute. He soon came bounding out of the house with his Cubs hat on, and wearing his mitt. I saw delight in Mrs. Parker’s face as she waved good-bye and closed the door.

Roger was a well-liked, friendly guy, and that’s why none of us gave him a hard time for struggling whenever it was his turn to read aloud. We snickered at Bill Herman, a heavy, white kid who read below grade level, but we encouraged Roger by whispering the words to him. Could we be accused of patronizing Roger because he was black, or would it be more appropriate to say we were being cruel to Bill Herman because he was overweight?

Roger had a habit of sucking his thumb when he was uncomfortable, even refusing to speak. Still we overlooked this odd behavior, and reached out to him. He was just plain likable.

My appreciation for the unique senses of humor of black women was formed in the third grade as a result of my friendship with Etti. She was a plump girl with neat rows of braids. Etti was the funniest kid in class. She made jokes under her breath about teachers, especially our gym teacher. Etti’s unique phrases such as “upside her head,” “kick her booty,” and “beaten with a switch,” were new to us. She sang funny songs that she wrote in her head about various people, especially teachers.

After a game of *steal the bacon* in gym class, we changed from our gym shoes to our street shoes, and walked back to class. Etti spontaneously broke into song as she danced and twirled in her powder blue dress. “That lady sure is stanky, and she ain’t got no butt, uh-uh. If she comes at me with a switch, she can kiss my booty.” Etti danced along repeating these lyrics, until we were back in our seats.

Near the end of fourth grade, in May of 1967, the school board decided they would bus more blacks into Michigami’s grade schools at the start of the next school year. We would all be together in junior high school in a few years anyway. To ease the transition for the new kids, in May of 1967 the school board instituted an orientation day at our school for the incoming black students. I was given one of the coveted buddy positions: to accompany a newcomer as he became acquainted with the school. I arrived that day anticipating the important role I would play by helping someone to feel at home. I suspected that my potential protégée would be nervous.

George Turner was tall, lanky, soft-spoken, and unflappable—characteristics that made him seem mature for a ten year old. Proud that I had such a cool black guy as my buddy, I acted protective—or perhaps possessive—of George. I explained to him how to get around the small school; pointed out the nice teachers, and other things that I thought were important. He listened politely, but didn’t seem interested in anything I had to say. Ben Rubin, the most popular kid in school, was roughhousing with his black buddy, and they seemed to be having a lot more fun.

Then the games began, consisting mostly of track and field events that allowed George’s physical prowess to explode into view. I was shoved aside as hordes of admiring white kids surrounded George hoping to become his friend. One of the competitions was a long jump. I drove my skinny body a respectable distance—far enough so that there was no derisive laughter.

Then it was George's turn. His long legs looked like stilts under his black trousers. He took to the air for so great a distance that he appeared to fly. Kids rushed at him from all sides shouting words of wonder, and stretching to pat George on the back. Our gym teacher said he would have to check, but he guessed George broke our school long jump record.

As George's popularity kept him busy and away from me, I waved to him a few times. He'd found a kindred athletic spirit in Ben Rubin, the only one who came close to George's physical abilities.

The following September, on the first day of fifth grade, I ran up to George on the playground to say, "Hi." He looked down at me with absolutely no recognition in his eyes.

George was not in my class that year, so there was little chance for a friendship to develop, even if he had liked me. As the years went on I remembered how my excitement at being assigned to be George's buddy quickly turned to disappointment. George never spoke to me again. He went on to continued popularity, and earned a track scholarship to a leading university.

Years later, a white co-worker asked me if I knew a George Turner from grade school. Her "absolutely delightful" new next-door neighbor—she lived in a very exclusive neighborhood—went to junior high in Hampden during the same years that I did.

"I asked George if he remembered you, Glen, but he said he never heard of you. Do you remember him?"

"Nope. Never heard of him." I pursed my lips, and shook my head back and forth decisively, as if somehow George could feel slighted by my response.

Other blacks bussed to our school from across the canal with George included, Kevin McPherson, his sidekick Curtis, and the towering Serena. Kevin was square-faced and muscular;

Curtis, lean and lithe. Light-skinned Serena kept her eyes fixed in angry slits. Their behavior was unfamiliar to us. This trio fought with teachers, and had no fear of being sent out to the hall where they pushed unsuspecting white kids into lockers. They weren't even fazed by a visit to the principal's office. To our surprise, Serena, a *girl*, was the most violent of the three.

They and others among the additional kids bussed to our school that year, came predisposed to dislike the rest of us. The other white kids and I attempted to befriend them, but we were rebuffed. We made an unconscious group decision to keep our distance, and to simply observe both them and the adults in authority who tried to figure out how to respond. We watched our black friends, like Cleon and Etti, navigate the increasingly choppy waters between the angry, sometimes violent new kids, and the rest of us.

One day I was acting the class clown, as I often did, and my teacher sent me out in the hall. This was considered punishment, and I took it seriously enough that I would never confess it at home. As I stood outside the door to the class, bored and waiting for the official wave from Mrs. Klein to re-enter, if I "were willing to exercise some self control," a lone figure slowly approached from the other end of the hall. He moved slowly, zigzagging from one side of the hall to the other, looking into classrooms. Then he noticed me. I looked like a lost seal pup to a hunting shark named Kevin McPherson. He approached with his usual saunter and sneer.

"Hey, Kev," I said, willing the tension away. "What're you doing out here? Did you get in trouble, like me?"

Without a word, he put his hands on my chest and pushed me up against the lockers.

"Gimme a quarter, boy."

I pushed back at him. "Why do you need a quarter?" I tried to buy some time as I looked quickly in both directions for a teacher to save me.

Kevin put me in a headlock. “You better give me a quarter, honky,” he muttered, “or I’ll kick your ass.”

“Mr. McPherson! What do you think you’re doing?” The librarian shouted from the stairwell door.

Kevin released me. “Glen, return to your classroom, and tell Mrs. Klein I sent you back. Kevin you come with me.”

Kevin was suspended from school for three days, and I feared he would beat me up when he returned, but that didn’t happen—at least not for another three years.

In the spring of fifth grade, in the wake of Martin Luther King’s assassination, many of Chicago’s blacks rioted through their own neighborhoods. Some of the fathers of my white classmates owned retail stores in those neighborhoods, employing blacks from the surrounding community. The businesses were burned down, their owners and the jobs they brought never returned. The vacant lots still remain. Being white in a black majority community had become life threatening.

Sixth grade meant it was time for the kids in Michigami to migrate over the canal to the junior high school located in the black neighborhood of Hampden.

To outsiders, Michigami was an undiversified, Jewish suburb that served as a postwar step from the city into America’s growing middle class of homeowners. The incomes and postwar houses were modest by the standards of Chicago’s north shore, but those of us residing within Michigami, attending the three elementary schools that funneled into the Hampden junior high school, were keenly aware of economic and other demographic differences that existed among our enclaves.

My school and our immediate neighborhood had originally been off-limit to Jews. Prosperous Irish-Catholics built their colonial style homes in the 1940s and '50s surrounding St. John's Church. The majority of property deeds had clauses restricting Jews and "Negroes" from purchasing the homes.

On June 13th of 1968, as we said good-bye to elementary school, Americans were on edge due to a paroxysm of violence that seemed to drag us inexorably to a dark place. Race riots after Dr. King's death in April were barely behind us; only one week had passed since Robert Kennedy's assassination. On the horizon: the Democratic National Convention, with its angry, youthful protesters, and violent police response; the killing of Fred Hampton; and the Manson murders. In spite of the national turmoil, my friends and I were only anxious about matriculating to junior high school.

With 270 fifth graders merging into one, sixth grade class, new pecking orders were established. Our pre-existing reputations were now put up for re-examination. Like-minded kids from each school gravitated to each other. The factors, both hard and nebulous, that made a kid cool or queer, or smart or dumb were universal.

Black kids had additional matters to contend with. They were absorbing increasingly loud and repetitive messages of black pride, black power, and black identity, with little direction accompanying these messages, and no guidance on how to apply them positively in school or elsewhere. Without guidance, many of my black classmates entered junior high believing they should be angry, and in battle mode against "honky." Some of the black kids absorbed the barrage of black power and pride messages, and cooked them into a sense of entitlement. No one in a leadership position at school diffused their anger, or gave an alternative way to channel it, other than to tell the black kids to feel some sort of free-floating pride in being black. I don't think the kids were sure of the origins of that pride, or how to manifest it for good, and no one was waiting for them at the school entrance with an award for showing up black. I don't know how I would've

behaved with all that weight on my shoulders, and no one to guide me in the direction of personal accomplishment. The black kids groped for identities and status among themselves, in a parallel dimension that rarely overlapped the rest of us.

The predatory Kevins and Serenas replaced the friendly Cleons and Ettis as iconic black classmates. Few of the friendships with our black elementary school classmates survived the passage through junior high. No dramatic episode marked their devolution. By the end of sixth grade, our interactions dissolved into noncommittal nods and brief “heys,” and our extracurricular playtimes came to an end. A new acquaintanceship formed between some of the black and white kids, but these rarely developed the intimacy shared in close friendships within the races. We became familiar strangers.

Chapter 3

New Years Eve 1970

This was to be the year we'd refer to as the year Grandpa *died* and the year of my *incident*. Four decades later, when few of us are left to remember the year firsthand, we never say Grandpa was *murdered*, perhaps trying to avoid any residual pain. My *incident*, revolving as it did around race relations, is still a touchy subject we never mention.

The '60s would not go quietly into history. The revolutions they brought, although rooted in those ten years, continued unfinished, and branched continuously. That night, at age twelve, I stood at the entrance of the futuristic sounding decade of the 1970s, unable to imagine a more complex world. More precisely, I *sat* at the entrance of the new decade, in a worn velvet theater seat, in a neighborhood movie palace that wouldn't survive to see 1980. I leaned on my right arm to catch the scent of Mom's peppermint gum, thus diluting the odor of Grandma's Ben Gay emanating from my left. We watched *Oliver Twist* try to escape Bill Sykes, while Londoners sang catchy tunes. Outside of this isolation booth, the planet reeled. Our world had been knocked from its orbit of complacency during the decade that at the stroke of midnight would pass into history.

As midnight came and went unremarked, it was a malapropos passing of the tumultuous decade—the only one I really knew since the time of my birth, in 1957. I had no memory of the Eisenhower years. I was in first grade in 1963-64 when Lee Harvey Oswald and the Beatles blew open the doors to unrest. Or was it Pandora's Box? Now, in the darkened movie theater, there was no way to acknowledge that the '60s had given way to 1970. The audience for this second-run movie was older and probably immune to the thrill I felt at the fact that when I returned to school, I'd date my papers with a "7" instead of a "6."

Without missing a beat, at the turn of the decade my usual demons continued to scout out my mind for places to settle. On the screen I watched what I believed to be the safe, Victorian world where there was no room to doubt one's identity.

After the movie, my family's immediate concerns were modest. My internal struggles and those of humanity became a dim backdrop to the more pressing problem we faced as we entered the Gold Coin Delicatessen, ninety minutes into the New Year.

"Booth or table?" the beehive-haired, gum-chewing cliché of a diner waitress, whose name badge proclaimed her to be Lana, asked no one in particular. The difficulty Jews had in selecting seats at restaurants had not yet become fodder for Jackie Mason, and was a real concern to Mom and Grandma. Drafts, the proximity to doors (entrance, bathrooms, kitchen), who else was seated in the vicinity, lighting, heating or air conditioning vents, and the perceived cleanliness of the table or chairs or booths, all had to be weighed and ranked in a delicate balance. Based on past experience with my family, the chance of some hostess or maitre'd making all those calculations, and coming out with the correct location to seat us was nil.

Lana waited patiently, and we finally settled on a table in the center of the room, under a light fixture, away from any front entrance draft or germs traveling from a bathroom. There were no vents threatening to blow air on anyone. The dark, imitation walnut Formica table looked clean, and it was neatly set with mix and match silverware. Mom would inspect each utensil when she removed it from its napkin sheath. No one detected any objectionable material left on any of the imitation colonial wooden chairs that Grandma would eventually find too hard for her behind. No one sat at tables in our immediate vicinity.

The dark walls were made of sheet paneling that might have been left over from someone's basement remodeling project. Gold tinsel framed the wide window facing the street. A sign strung across a mirror behind the cash register spelled out Season's Greetings. For balance,

there was a plastic Hanukkah menorah with all nine, low-voltage, orange candle tip bulbs glowing from the ledge beneath the mirror.

There were few New Years revelers in the restaurant, which sat on the southern border of Hampden along Evans Avenue, facing the northern border of Chicago across the street. It was a quiet commercial block of small family businesses. Nearby residents had probably gone to bed shortly after Guy Lombardo and his orchestra played *Auld Lang Syne*.

Within five minutes we had placed our orders. I hungered for my usual corned beef on rye with mustard, to be washed down with a chocolate phosphate.

Our conversation that night ranged from innocent chatter to analytical and self-critical musings, and finally, controversial topics—whispered in case someone was taking it all down on a tape recorder for Walter Cronkite to play back on the *CBS Evening News*. The world was in flux, and decades or even centuries-old social norms were crumbling. It was difficult to know what was still okay to talk about, or what was newly permitted that had previously been taboo. Non-celebrities like us didn't make those decisions. We learned on our feet. The daily list of “in” and “out” came from sources of authority, such as television situation comedies.

“Did you notice how *shmutzadik* (see the *Glossary for Yiddish terms*) everything was back then? All that fish and food lying out in the open market, and all those people with dirty hands dancing around it? Feh.” Grandma Mae weighed in with her review of the movie as she shifted the lox omelet around on her plate.

Grandpa Leo finished a gulp of his coffee with a drawn out “ah” sound that I always found annoying. “I’m glad you enjoyed the movie Mae. You took away the most important thing.” He enjoyed gently chiding her, although Grandma, who couldn’t laugh at herself, didn’t appreciate it. Grandpa had the cerebral advantage, but Grandma spoke from the gut, frequently

trumping Grandpa's humorous pokes. When there was no television handy, Grandma and Grandpa provided entertainment.

“Who bit you in the *tuches*, Leo? I'm just asking a question. I liked the picture. That little boy took a good part. I'm just saying I wouldn't eat that food.” Grandma glanced at the rim of her coffee cup for any telltale lipstick marks from a previous user. Her weak blue eyes squinted, and she pursed her lips giving the cup a grudging approval.

“It looks like we are transitioning smoothly into the '70s. Nothing seems to have changed.” Mom laughed at her own attempt at humor, looking to Dad and me, encouraging our laughter. Grandpa loved to see us laugh. Dad smiled and nodded knowingly as he reached over, and put a hand on my head, rubbing it affectionately, and leaning forward to see if I was smiling. I was. I felt loved and safe at that moment. As long as there were no peers to view this Rockwellian scene, I could soak it up.

“That *Sheyna* Wallis, the one who played Nancy,” Grandma continued unperturbed, “she must be Jewish with a name like Sheyna. Like my Glen here, the *sheyna punim*.” She reached over and pinched my cheek. I can remember every detail of Grandma's hands. She kept her nails short and rarely polished. It made her fingers appear stubbier and less elegant than Mom's. Grandpa had given Grandma some expensive jewelry over the years, but she kept it hidden in one of the dresser drawers that she lightly scented with lilac sachets. Lilacs were Grandma's favorite flower, and like me, she adored any shade of purple. I read somewhere that purple was the favorite color of immature people and homosexuals.

Grandma never removed her simple, silver wedding band that had tiny, linked hearts carved into it, but the rest of the jewelry remained in its flowery tomb. She never sought to impress with possessions—only with her housekeeping, and by the successes of her descendents.

I'm sure I was beaming after Grandma's reference to my "pretty face." As long as none of my friends were around to hear Grandma's unending ways of praising me, I actually enjoyed it, and found it reassuring. I had enough feedback in my short life to know I was a fairly cute boy, but I craved praise, particularly for my appearance and my intelligence. I didn't hold out for recognition of my athletic ability, so it helped to be smarter and at least as good looking as the jocks.

Mom rolled her eyes, and took a break from her Julian salad. "Ma, I think her name is ShayNEE, not Sheyna. And I guarantee you she isn't Jewish." I noticed a little of the usual impatience with Grandma in Mom's voice.

Not one to take correction lying down, Grandma shot back, although she looked at Dad for reassurance. "Oh? And do people know Dinah Shore, Shelly Winters, and Barbra Streisand are Jewish?" Grandma was almost indignant.

Mom's face showed her exasperation. "Ma, everybody knows Barbra Streisand is Jewish. She hardly tries to hide it. The Egyptians berated Omar Sharif for playing opposite her in *Funny Girl*, because she was Jewish. It was on the news."

I heard Grandpa sigh. I knew he wouldn't miss an opportunity to teach me some sort of lesson. Although he spoke to no one in particular, his eyes focused on me. He lowered his voice, and leaned into the table, a sure sign that controversy cometh.

"The knee-jerk hatred of all Jews by so many Arabs is immoral and disturbing."

"There's good and bad in all groups, Leo. Look at some of our Jews." That was the extent of Grandma's geopolitics. It aligned with her view of life in general: you had to take the good with the bad.

“This is different.” Grandpa was still looking at me as he continued using his quieter voice. “There is a difference between randomly immoral people and an entire population that takes an immoral position. The anti-Jewish propaganda is dangerous and reminiscent of Nazism. How can it be so soon after the Holocaust?”

“Okay, Dad. Let’s not get into that now. Let’s not get too serious.” Mom worshipped Grandpa, but she wasn’t in the mood for the direction the discussion was taking. Grandpa hadn’t finished his lesson, and wasn’t to be deterred, until I had something to think about. He gently rested his palm on Mom’s hand.

“Just let me finish a moment Eileen. Glen, you remember this: sometimes, people who mean you no direct harm give free rein to those who do. Their reasons could be indifference, self-preservation, or a willingness to go along. After so much propaganda, they convince themselves the haters must be telling the truth. It reduces any internal conflict they might feel.”

Now when I recall this scene in the diner, Grandpa was amazing. He could speak coherently and unscripted no matter the hour of the day, providing the subject matter was related to Jews or social justice or both. He continued, “In time, the besieged Jews will be written off as a scourge that was removed. History provides examples. You don’t have to go back too far or too far away. It isn’t the Indians who write our history books.”

“Dad, that’s actually quite profound, but it’s New Year’s Eve, and the start of a new decade...”

Grandpa was unstoppable, although he maintained an air of serenity that added heft to his words, in a way that a tirade could not.

“Can you imagine the global uproar if we dared say about any other people what they say about us? Of course we never would. Why? We are taught that God cares about all His children.

Glen, what's the lesson at the Passover Seder surrounding the ten plagues? You know what I'm talking about. Tell us."

I was caught off guard. I expected to listen, and not to participate. Mom and Dad looked at me expectantly.

"He's tired, Dad. It's almost two o'clock in the morning." Mom pointed to her watch for emphasis. Her wrists were tiny, and the watch face was miniscule compared to the big round circle of Dad's timepiece.

In trying to shield me from the possibility of not knowing the answer to Grandpa's question, Mom had bought me some time.

"I know, Ma. Grandpa is talking about how we take a drop of wine out of our glasses for each plague to reduce our celebration, because we know God isn't happy about drowning the Egyptians in the Red Sea, because everyone is His child."

Grandpa beamed, and for the first time since we started this discussion of Arabs, he considered the food on his plate. "That's right, Glen. We have to treat everyone with dignity, because we're all made in God's image."

Now it was Dad's turn to take control.

"Dad, are you going to watch the Rose Bowl tomorrow with Glen and me?" Dad had jumped in to curry favor with Mom. I looked forward to spending that time with Dad and Grandpa. Neither Dad nor I followed sports closely, but he saw it as an opportunity to spend some man-to-man time with me. If we had talked more openly with each other back then, we might have chosen to do something else together. Mom found pleasure in seeing us sharing time. She often joined us, and became more involved in the action than either of "her men."

My older sister Nancy grudgingly accepted my time with Dad, only because she couldn't bear to sit and watch "anything so stupid." Grandma didn't understand subtleties, and if she saw Grandpa, Dad, and me seated together in front of the television, she took it as an opportunity to share random thoughts with a captive audience. If Grandma had something to say, the Bears' defensive line couldn't stop her.

"Of course I'll watch. But I'm more interested in seeing Penn State beat Missouri in the Orange Bowl, so I can call Uncle Irv in St. Louis, and gloat a bit." Grandpa and his older brother had a feigned rivalry. They used it as an excuse to talk to each other more often than they needed to.

"Speaking of all that, Eileen, we should call Aunt Agnes tomorrow to wish her and Faye a Happy New Year." We knew how Grandma's mind worked, and no one questioned her train of thought. The Orange Bowl represented Florida oranges to Grandma. Aunt Agnes spent the winters in Miami Beach, and her daughter Faye was visiting her. The connection couldn't be clearer.

With a swishing sound, the revolving door deposited two, black, teenage girls with four small children into the restaurant. Grandma began to cluck her tongue.

"Look at that," she said, and we were back down to a conspiratorial whisper. "Those girls with those little children. Those kids should be in bed, and those girls are barely out of high school. How are they going to raise those little children?" Then Grandma sat back, and nodded her head once, blinking her eyes for emphasis as she ran her hand down her ample bust, smoothing out any wrinkles on her purple wool dress.

"They may not be able to," Grandpa answered, shaking his head thoughtfully. "You and I and others might have to help them out."

“Let’s stop right there,” Mom hissed. “Let’s not make any assumptions. How do you know if those are their children or younger sisters? Maybe they’re babysitting. Dad, you know better than anyone how it could be with them.”

Grandma raised an eyebrow at Mom’s implication. I caught it, and knew she was thinking that this could be one of those rare, pleasurable examples of Mom doubting Grandpa’s wisdom. Maybe this was a sign that 1970 would be a good year for Grandma; Mom would agree with her more than with Grandpa.

“Eileen, you know your old father better than that. I’m *not* judging, and I *am* speaking from my experience at the law center. Mother might be right, and if she is, the possible difficulties that lie ahead for those children sadden me.”

“What decent babysitter has babies out at two in the morning? Who’s kidding whom?” For Grandma the world was black and white, requiring little analysis beyond her instantaneous categorizations.

“Mom and Dad, I think we should enjoy each other’s company, and celebrate another New Year that finds all of us healthy.” Dad quietly drew a line in the sand. Mom’s parents accommodated him. In Grandma’s eyes, her beloved son-in-law was the one person who could do no wrong. She smiled at him.

Grandpa lifted his cup in a toast. “Here, here, Jerry. Good idea. Here’s to 1970—a big year for us, when our Glen will become a *bar mitzvah*. We should all dance at his wedding someday, and find the world in peace.” We toasted with coffee, water, and my phosphate. Grandpa made that extended “ah” sound again.

Grandma put her spin on Grandpa’s toast. “I’ll be happy to make it to Glen’s *bar mitzvah* with this pain in my knee. I’m telling you, if that doctor got his license in this country, I’m Chinese.”

“Mother, just toast with us please.” Mom shook her head, and half smiled, half smirked. The year was off and running, and we would have to struggle to keep up with it.

I kept one eye on the black party seated in a booth by the window, and I looked for the behaviors I had come to expect after a year and a half of attending junior high school.

So much had changed from the first few years of integration at my elementary school. By some definitions, many of my friends and I had transitioned from innocent babes to closet racists.

Chapter 4

Wednesday, January 14, 1970

Winter vacation had been over for more than a week. Thank the Lord for the recently declared King holiday, since it meant no school the next day. Lincoln's birthday, always an important one in Illinois, was a cold month away. Today I faced the petty world of seventh grade where a daily minefield of threats to popularity threatened each of us. For boys, our perceived masculinity was our most valued and protected asset. For girls it was looks—in some cases as specific as breast size. For everyone, it was that elusive quality of coolness. None of our preoccupations had anything to do with formal education—an incidental of showing up to class.

I was still asleep enjoying my favorite, but rare dream of self-propelled flight. I wafted above the trees that stood at the street corner next to the grade school I used to attend. The bare winter trees allowed the kids and the crossing guard on the street below to notice me, and they began to point in amazement and envy. I was beyond the reach of the pettiness of the playground. My status soared invincibly with the ability to fly, so I pretended to ignore the oohs and aahs below as they ascended to my privileged ears.

Something grabbed my leg. Had I gotten stuck in one of the upper branches of a tree?

“Come on, Glen. I want to make this bed. It's time for you to get up.”

It was no tree. It was Grandma. I tried futilely to shut out the intrusion, but Grandma was persistent. I opened my eyes, and crashed mercilessly back to reality, sentenced to life on the ground with everyone else.

Grandma was in the housedress and no-nonsense shoes that she wore when she was tidying up, enforcing the message that she was locked and loaded for housework. Making my bed was next on her list.

“Alright, Grandma. Just a second.” I tried not to sound annoyed, since it wasn’t her fault that she had to yank me from my reverie. Dad, Mom, and Nancy already left for the day, so it fell to Grandma to see that I was ready for school. I closed my eyes for a second to see if I could conjure up the joyous feeling of floating, if only for a moment, but I failed.

I had taken the habit of wearing my briefs under my pajamas, in order to hide the fact that I woke up every morning with an erection. While some boys might take pride in their stiff penises, I was uncomfortable flaunting my maleness around anyone—especially, but not only, around family. The underwear also kept nocturnal emissions from leaving telltale signs on my sheets for Grandma or Melva, our housekeeper, to discover. I didn’t think about the telltale signs in my underwear.

I took showers before going to bed. My showers were taking longer than they used to, because I used my alone time to masturbate. The thought of a shower in the cold morning was unappealing. I brushed my teeth, and washed my face, and then stuck my head under the faucet to get my dark brown hair to fall the way I wanted it to. I made a neat part on the left side, and brushed it to swoop down over my forehead, just above my eyes. When I was younger, I would hear Mom’s friends marvel that my eye color changed from gray to blue to green depending on what I wore. They said I had “bedroom eyes,” and that girls would fall for them. This pleased me.

I went back to my room, and took off my pajamas, leaving on my white Hanes briefs. I pulled a Hanes t-shirt from my top drawer. My dresser, in fact, everything in my room, was neat and orderly to please Grandma, Melva, and me. It was part of my pattern to try to maintain control over an uncooperative world. I also sought approval from everyone on the planet. The path I trod was a rough one.

I only wore Hanes underwear, because that was the brand Mom bought for me. She was as loyal to brands as she was to her beliefs, which were hard to unseat. It took extremely sound

reasoning, tenacity, and evidence to get her to change a brand or an opinion. In the next months, some of the beliefs on which her life had been built would be put to the test, and found wanting.

In my closet, I easily located a blue, long-sleeve cotton shirt, my flared blue pants with broad grey stripes, and a blue v-neck sweater. Finally, I pulled on my heavy blue socks and the desert boots Mom had recently sprayed to keep the snow and street salt from penetrating.

As a final touch, I reached into the box made to look like a miniature pool table sitting on my dresser, and found the elastic choker of tiny black beads that I'd strung together during the previous "summer of love." My friends and I purchased the materials at a faux head shop at a strip mall in Michigami. You could also find incense burners, black light posters of rock bands, tie-dyed shirts, protest lapel pins, and any number of objects with the symbol for peace. There were all things salient to suburban, hippie-wannabe youth in revolt.

In the family room I stopped and turned on the TV to watch *Ray Raynor and Friends*, a staple of a baby boomer's childhood in Chicago. Though too juvenile for me, the show reminded me of the years before I attended school, when in "footie pajamas," I sat in front of the TV as everyone else rushed out of the house, and Grandma washed breakfast dishes. I didn't go to nursery school, as it was called, nor did anyone I knew.

At the kitchen table, Grandma immediately set a bowl of oatmeal in front of me, along with two pieces of rye bread toast spread with Fleischman's margarine and Welch's grape jelly. I drank a glass of orange juice, a glass of milk, and swallowed a vitamin tablet.

Matzah, our Miniature Schnauzer, was seated next to me in the chair he considered his own, and he pawed at my arm in anticipation of any food I'd hand over. Dad often said that Jews could pass a bar exam, sit for the CPA test or medical school boards, but never learn how to train a dog. In college, when I developed close friendships with non-Jews, I was amazed to see their

dogs following them without a leash, and obeying the slightest click of the tongue. How ever did they do it?

The *Chicago Sun-Times* was open to where Grandma must've stopped reading when she heard me come downstairs. Her glasses rested on the newspaper. Grandma sat back down with her usual sigh as she reached over and pushed my plate closer to me.

"Don't forget to take your lunch. It's right there on the counter."

"Okay, Gram."

"I put your bus money next to the lunch. Don't forget it."

"Okay, Gram."

"Take your vitamin."

"I did, Gram."

"I tell you, my knee hurts me so in this weather."

Were there any meteorological conditions that didn't cause Grandma's knee or some other part of her body to ache?

"I'm going home after you leave to shop for Grandpa, but I'll be back when you get home from school. Be sure to come right home."

"Okay, Gram."

"I'm telling you, if I had stock in the CTA, I'd be rich with all this back and forth."

Before leaving, I glanced back enviously at Matzah stretched out and dozing in a patch of sunlight streaming through the family room window. I kissed Grandma's cheek as she warned me to watch for the machines—my 19th-century-born grandmother's word for cars—and headed out into the dazzling sunshine that reflected off the crusty layer of white snow. Brilliant days in

January meant Arctic-like air, but no wind that day meant tolerable temperatures. I marched down the driveway that Dad and I had shoveled on Sunday, and walked the half block to the school bus stop on my way to the combination fun, misery, and theater that was our junior high school. I received many lessons in that building, although not always in the classroom, and not always what Mom and Dad planned for me to learn.

David and Mark, two friends from my block, were already at the bus stop. We knew each other since early childhood, but they weren't my very best friends. Neither one had older siblings, which I believed inclined them to be less cool. I theorized that older brothers and sisters exposed one to the latest fads sooner than anyone else could.

David was smarter than I was, but I found his humor to be immature by my 12-year-old standards. His family came from a small town, unusual for Jews, and they were blonds. In her frequent review of my friends, Grandma dismissed his family as Jews who had been turned into Gentiles by their time spent living in a small town.

That morning, we all looked the same in our parkas with our hoods up as we exhaled steam and stamped our feet for warmth. David and Mark wore parkas in a shade of green that reminded me of boogers, while mine was a rare chocolate brown that complemented my hair color. We nodded "hi" to each other, but didn't say much after that. Poor David was wearing Hush Puppies. You couldn't be cool in Hush Puppies. *Cool* and its opposite, *queer*, were the too most overworked words in our vocabularies.

The glare of the sun on the snow caused us to look down, and we collapsed within ourselves trying to stay warm thinking about the day's trials ahead. We didn't see the bus as it rounded the corner, until it stopped in front of us. By the time it arrived at our stop the bus was usually more than half-filled. I stepped up and paid my fifteen cents. I turned and faced the long

aisle of insecurity that ran up the center of the bus. Each day there was a risk that someone would yell out a cutting remark, either in friendship or out of adolescent cruelty.

The only people who could vocalize loudly on the bus were cool kids, mostly the jocks who had the authority to do as they pleased, as did the few aberrant white kids whom I considered to meet the definition of juvenile delinquents. If someone cut you down on the bus in a friendly way, it was good for your reputation. It meant that a cool kid considered you worthy of a joke. If the remark was meant to sting and gain points for the assailant, you were doomed to sit in shame. Someone high up in the pecking order decreed you were not cool; therefore you were not.

For boys, the cruelest accusations, the ones that destroyed junior high careers, whether leveled boisterously by a white boy or softly by a white girl, were the ones that pilloried your masculinity: fem, sissy, fag, and faggot. A reputation had little chance of recovering from that sort of label.

Never having been the recipient of remarks on my daily walk down that aisle of insecurity, I only half braced myself as I approached the middle rows claimed by us seventh graders. I took the seat next to David, instantly recognizing the hot chocolate scent of his house that permeated his jacket. We pushed back our hoods, and held our lunch bags in our laps. The seats closest to the front of the bus were for the sixth graders. The eighth graders and one celebrity seventh grader owned the back rows.

“Have you seen *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*?” I asked David. I hoped to arrange an outing over the weekend with my friends. We often went to nearby PrairieVille mall to see movies or just hang out.

“I saw it already with Gary. He went with his parents last night, and they took me with.” David had no idea how his words stung and threatened. Gary Kogan was one of my new best friends, since entering junior high. He was in my class, not David's. I would confront Gary when

I saw him at school that morning. This was an attack on my status within my own group of friends. I couldn't let it go unchallenged.

Two stops later, Ben Rubin, our seventh grade celebrity, got on the bus and prepared to strut straight to the back to fall in with his eighth grade friends. Ben and I were best friends in elementary school, but his coolness and popularity now far surpassed mine. By the end of sixth grade, junior high school had reshuffled our elementary school hierarchy leaving Ben and me levels apart. His status as a jock had combined with his overall great looks to make an unbeatable combination. My slighter frame and the emerging traits that would come to be recognized as gay, worked against me. At the age of twelve, I was already regretting the lost glory of my youth. Bitterness found a home.

Ben and I hadn't spent time together since the end of sixth grade, but when the invitations, in fancy script, to my *bar mitzvah* went out in a few months his name would be on one of them. My decision to invite him was an effort to delay the inevitable. Ben would accept my invitation, but his presence was awkward among my real friends, and Ben and I never spoke much after my *bar mitzvah* party.

I look back with added regret that in fourth and fifth grades Ben seemed to be hinting at experimenting sexually with me, but I pretended not to notice and gave no encouragement. Though my instincts warned against it, I wanted to get naked with him so much that my stomach ached as I imagined being close to his exposed, beautiful body, and having the liberty to touch him. I never wanted to give anyone any ammunition to use against me in the future. By age ten I was fearful, while Ben had nothing to fear. He could always be secure in his reputation, as the epitome of masculinity.

On that bus, every girl (and I) watched Ben with desire, and every guy (me too) looked on with envy. Ben was so damned blessed with the things prized by adolescents. In addition to his

good looks and superior athletic ability, his dimpled smile, clefted chin, and teeth that wouldn't require braces were disarming to students and teachers alike. Living up to the lowered expectations of their highly assimilated parents, few of the Jewish girls cared that he was in the bottom half of the intelligence curve. Nor did they mind that he dropped out of Hebrew school, and wouldn't become a *bar mitzvah*, because he needed that time to hone his formidable athletic skills. Mom thought that those choices demonstrated poor parenting and a disregard for his heritage.

“They are stressing the wrong values in life. What message will he take from that choice? It's a *shanda*.” I was glad Mom thought that way, since I was ambivalent about sports. I hated standing in a hot, sunny field waiting for a ball that I didn't want to come my way; not when there was a cool, air-conditioned house, and a pitcher of lemonade waiting. Hebrew school was a good excuse to avoid intramurals or leagues that had after school practices. Either way, her message that our Jewish identity and the values that accompany it were important stuck with me.

As Ben stepped up on the bus, his biggest and probably most frustrated admirer, Nancy Lefko, shouted her daily greeting to him. Nancy never paid attention to me, though we'd been in classes together since kindergarten. Grandma always referred to “nice Jewish girls,” but I didn't find Nancy or the girls in her clique to be very nice, nor were they very good students.

Nancy and her friends were the cool girls. I called them “mall girls” because they spent a lot of time at PrairieVille Mall where they bought outfits on the cutting edge of suburban fashion, made from natural fibers. They wore their hair parted in the center or on one side from where it descended straight down to below their cashmere-covered shoulders. They gossiped endlessly, and no one, including the girls in their own clique, was safe from their cruel judgments. During breaks from school they often went to Florida with their families. While almost every white student in our school would fall demographically into the middle to upper middle class, some were more *upper* than others.

If the cool kids were aware of the concerns of the larger world, they gave no sign of it. Pollution, Viet Nam, civil rights, the women's liberation movement, and the importance of a Jewish homeland—all topics around my family's dinner table and among me and my friends—never seemed to break through to their consciousness. I must confess: if given the choice back then, I think I could've given up those noble concerns to be accepted among the jocks and the mall girls, as one of their own.

While Ben and Nancy's crowd was not physically violent (that seemed to be the provenance of the black kids who went to our school, and the Catholic kids who did not), they were dangerous. There was an effeminate boy in school named Ed. The mall girls would whisper the dreaded *fem* to each other in front of Ed's face. The meanest among the guys would use the even more offensive "faggot." There but for a slightly stronger wrist went I. The pain in Ed's moist eyes was apparent to me, but there was nothing to be done for him. His lot had been cast, and neither he nor anyone of us could alter that fact. In 1970, there was no path of redress, no anti-bullying campaign, no counselors, and no acceptable alternatives to the cultural norms for masculine behavior. For us, the high school in the TV program *Glee* would've been science fiction.

I tried to stay beneath their radar. Once I heard that a mall girl found me cute. My gut reaction? I was flattered and reminded of the days in our little elementary school when Ben and I were twinned together at the pinnacle of popularity. I had seen another guy like me pulled up from the middle ranks by one of Nancy Lefko's friends, because she thought he was cute. Eventually, she threw him back, and he suffered a barrage of malicious comments from the pretty mall girls, until they lost interest, and moved on to another victim. I resisted the temptation to play out of my league.

My prediction for a girl like Nancy: she'll go to college to study elementary education, and then drop out when some Jewish jock, like Ben, asks her to marry. Quickly morphing into her mother, she'll devote herself to shopping, decorating, and redecorating her colonial style home, with a basketball hoop over its double garage for Ben Jr. She and her marital trophy and their offspring will spend winter breaks in Miami Beach. There she'll dictate the evening's dinner plans from poolside, under a sheen of baby oil, while the jock tunes her out as he follows some ballgame on a transistor radio, with an earplug. I was keenly aware that I envied Nancy and her friends this path that was closed to me by virtue of being a boy. This yearning to be a future Mrs. Rubin created an additional layer on the growing mass of guilt in my gut.

While my outer, cool indifference to the girls got no response from them, Ben's similar treatment of them only intensified their interest. I could feel the longing for the Adonis that was beyond the reach of mere mortals.

"Heeeey, Ben." Nancy called out, annoying me as Ben made his way up the aisle.

Ben ignored her, as usual. Suddenly, he yanked a sixth grader out of his seat by his jacket collar, and lifted the frozen window, out of which the younger boy had been staring only a moment earlier. Ben stuck his head out into the cold.

"Hey O'Malley. Suck my dick, you fuck," Ben shouted and then laughed. "Okay, Jerry. See you at practice."

There was silence throughout the bus except the pounding of my heart. The guys on the bus rolled their eyes, or pretended not to have heard what only Ben Rubin could've shouted out the bus window at eight o'clock in the morning as we rolled past Georgians, Tudors, colonials, and Greek revival houses. I replayed his words in my head maybe a thousand times in the fifteen seconds that had elapsed. I'd never actually heard that phrase vocalized. It had an effect on me, but I wasn't sure what it was. I was certain that later in the privacy of my room I'd examine the

incident again, and imagine Ben speaking those words to me. All the girls shared smiles and blushes. I hoped I revealed nothing of my inner turmoil.

Although Ben was no candidate for an academic scholarship, I think his action was calculated. He was toying with his fan club, and confirming his top gorilla status among even the eighth grade boys. The fact that he directed his remark to a Catholic kid from the private parish school was another not so subtle reminder of his status. Most of us Jewish guys were fodder for bullying from the tough Irish Catholics in the neighborhood, but they considered Ben tough enough to be a friend. Ben could beat up anyone, or so it was assumed.

I was jealous and desirous all at once. Self-conscious of my voice, and worried that I sounded more like a girl than a jock, I wouldn't dare yell anything out the bus window—even something as innocuous as, “see you later,” much less something as ballsy as “suck my cock.” I couldn't imagine what the reaction of the kids on the bus would've been to such an audacious move from a middle-ranker like me. The risk of a humiliating response of laughter from the crowd kept me paralyzed, in that and so many other instances.

By this point the rest of us guys were attempting to shake off Ben's testosterone as he ambled to the back of the bus, and sat down next to a very cool eighth grader who, a few weeks earlier, had been the first and only kid to come to school in a pair of elephant bell-bottomed pants. Almost no one else—except Ben—could've pulled off that fashion stunt. But Ben didn't need to.

The bus passed my favorite Tudor style house that now huddled for warmth behind the ice-limbed trees that lined the quiet street. We picked up one last group of kids before turning east towards Hampden. As the bus crossed the bridge over the canal that separated Michigami from the older neighboring town, I watched the steam rise from the contaminated water beneath the ice. Although I knew the steep-banked canal with wide swaths of grass on either side was a

sanitation canal, it made for a bucolic winter scene. How peaceful the whole area must have looked 130 years earlier when no one but Native Americans walked among the bears and wolves.

The image soon evanesced into gray reality. I recalled the riots that took place in Chicago's black neighborhoods a few years earlier. I heard more than one person say that if the blacks in Hampden decided to burn things down, as their urban brethren did, we could blow up the canal bridges to keep them from crossing over into Michigami. All had remained quiet in Hampden.

At the far bank, the bus entered the neighborhood of my black classmates whose houses surrounded our school. The homes were mostly older and smaller than those in Michigami, and they were wood framed instead of brick, but as Mom never tired of pointing out, "they are neat, tidy, and well-maintained, showing pride of ownership. The middle class blacks of Hampden are a credit to their race."

I overheard rumors at school, and observed signs of a poorer, "more dangerous" element of blacks moving in from Chicago's South Side to escape the growing black-on-black violence of the city.