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**T O T T E N V I L L E**

**(Stories of a Time)**

**by**

**Andrew Kass**

### **Author's Note**

This is a work of fiction. All the people and events paraded before the reader are products of the author's imagination, excepting only such historical personages or events as are cited to place these stories in a chronological context.

While I've invented stores, households, a hospital, and at least one place of worship, the town of Tottenville truly occupies the southernmost extent of Staten Island, New York City and New York State. And although I have substituted fictitious founding family names for actual bloodlines, Christopher Billopp was at the time of the American Revolution the master of the two-storey stone house above Billopp's Landing where an unsuccessful peace conference took place. Lt. Col. Billopp, an ardent Tory, was twice abducted by patriots during the conflict, and eventually removed with his family to Canada.

To my South Shore neighbors in Tottenville: I hope you will find this cycle of tales entertaining while forgiving any inadvertent misrepresentations of your unique village, our Island, and that time.

Andrew Kass

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**JUNE 1973**

## **The Journey**

## **The Journey**

George Smyte woke on the day he was to travel to the City and lingered on the sun-blocked sheets to compose himself. He studied the freckles on Margie's reposed back in the scoop of her pink satin nightgown. Sure sign of summer, even with the cool mist of morning. How little some things changed. And how much others: Lyn home soon from college. Kim graduating high school. And George himself, summoned off to the City.

He rose, did his morning, showered, and shaved in the good clean light of the southeast exposure. George had planned the added bathroom's placement carefully to account for the sun's location in all seasons, foliage of the oak stand along the property line, proximity to the warm chimney and physical separation from the main flow of noise. He had built this addition, every stone, stud, lathe and tile, every wire, pipe, casement and fixture, as his sanctuary.

George had planned to grab a cup of coffee and a couple of slices of toast, but Margie was absent from the bedroom when he returned to dress; the bacon and clatter in the air told him that she was setting a groaner to fortify him on his journey. He dressed carefully, to give her time: clean t-shirt, short sleeve white-on-white shirt, his good grey suit, the blue and red chevron tie.

As he worked the tie into a thick Windsor knot George reflected on the irony that, after twenty-one years as a mason and crew foreman, he had only seriously injured his back while building his perfect bathroom. It had been all he could do to get to the Merrill Avenue school job and walk steadily upright before helping to lift

the panel of sheetrock to which his disability was ascribed. And now a trip to the City to deal with the union benefits office.

George studied the unmarbled sky out the window and catalogued necessities for packing.

Down in the kitchen Margie poured his coffee as soon as she heard George's tread on the stairs. The eggs were over easy, the bacon just shy of crisp, the toast lay golden and buttered on a plate between George's butter knife and the jam pot. George set his brown vinyl satchel down just inside the archway from the dining room and leant to kiss Margie full on the lips.

Poor ol' bear, Margie thought as she said "G'mornin', hon." He was making a show, of course, and not fidgeting too badly. But his sky soft eyes were cloudy with doubt.

"Mornin', sugar," he said, and kissed her again.

She breathed his presence: soap, Vitalis, aftershave with a note of his own manly musk, felt his massive body enfolding hers, and she was back at the Old Home Day dance twenty-one years ago when she'd met this knockout Army corporal just back from Korea. She had known right away he was brave, because he didn't talk about the war, other than to tell funny stories about camp life and answer direct questions as briefly as possible. Oh, but could he dance!

"Your breakfast's getting cold," she said to gently prod him on to duty.

George pulled out the ladderback chair and sat, allowing himself a wince as he did so, for practice. Truth was, he felt pretty good. Much too good to go back to work, tending bar at Dobby's notwithstanding. Margie slid two yellow-eyed eggs onto his plate, followed with four strips of sizzling bacon. George swiped some jam onto a triangle of toast, grabbed a fork, and got to it.

"S'wonderful, babe," he beamed as Margie smiled and freshened his coffee.

Margie poured herself a cup and sat down behind it, setting the pot on a trivet between them.

"How's your back this morning?" she asked.

"The same," George mumbled through masticated eggs and toast. He traced yolk trails on the white Corel with the tines of his fork. "S'just a formality," he said. "A damn nuisance, but they got a right to do it where money's concerned."

It wasn't what she'd asked, but George knew it was what she'd meant. They sipped coffee, and shared a soft morning breeze with the birds and crickets. Peaceful, except for some turbulence pulling at Margie's face.

"George..." she began, staring at her coffee cup. She took a sip, then trained her slightly bulgy brown eyes on him. "You gonna talk about your pension?"

George shrugged.

"It might come up."

It was a double-edged sword. "Retired" meant "old". If only he could get money for doing nothing without being retired.... Better to stay in disability limbo awhile longer.

A heavy thump, creaking footfalls and a rush of plumbing upstairs told of the rising of one of the two Smyte siblings in residence. Lyn would be back from her junior year at Albany end of the week, but Kim and Joey had amply filled her void in the meantime. As if to demonstrate, another set of ghostly footsteps erupted into Kim's voice of outrage.

"Joey! Ya little jerk, you know I got graduation rehearsal t'day!"

"Can't hear you!" Joey sang, presumably from the shower.

George and Margie looked at each other, and the ceiling.

"Should I--" George started. No need to finish, since Kimmy was already storming down the stairs.



She planted her tousled fury in the doorway.

"Your son," she accused her parents, "is hogging the bathroom, on purpose, to make me late for graduation rehearsal. If he ever comes out, I am going to kill him."

"If we permitted that sort of thing," George replied, "you'd've been dead and your sister in prison long ago." With a sad yet not hungry look at the rest of his breakfast, George rose. "Use my bathroom, Kim. In honor of the occasion."

Kim stepped up for a hug, nearly tall as George.

"Thanks, Daddy. You'll do something about Joey when you come back?"

George smiled, ruffled her soft ochre mop.

"I'll send him to military academy first thing," he said.

"Mean it?" Kim gazed back hopefully.

"Upstairs," Margie put in, "or you'll be late."

George took a long slurp of coffee and reached for his satchel.

"I gotta go," he said.

"Aw, babe," Margie said as she brought him a hug, "you got plenty of time till the 6:30 train."

George returned the squeeze, and sighed.

"Still," he said. "Gotta park, and, you know..."

"Yeah, sure," Margie said. "You just wanna get away from me."

"Aww, Marg--"

"Can't stand me."

"Jesus K. Christ..."

"Do you have any idea when you'll be home?" Margie asked, downshifting with a suddenness that still surprised him.

"Nope. But I'll call ya soon as I have a chance."

"Kay, hon. Take care of yourself."

By now they were at the back door, hug, satchel and all.

"Sure thing."

"You'll take the bus when you get to the City?" she admonished.

"Yes'm," smooched George, edging out.

"I don't want you taking the subway an' I hear about it on the six o'clock news," said Margie.

"Got it," George said. Seeing no other way out, he enveloped her in a sudden, masterful kiss. He would have lifted her like the old days but for his back, so he just drew away and said, "Hold that till I get home."

"You bet," Margie said, holding herself with a histrionic shudder. "You just make sure you get back soon."

He was already at the garage.

"Call me when you get there!" Margie said.

He waved, and ducked inside. A moment later the garage door rolled up, and George took off in the gold Cutlass.

The car hummed away, the garage whirled shut, and Margie was alone in the false calm of the squabbly birds rustling in the trees. As soon as the two showers upstairs stopped hissing, Kimmy and Joey would be back at each other's throats. Lyn had managed to stay above that fray most of the time, but her absence at school had taught Margie about the dread silence that grown children leave behind. The arguing had since become an affirmation for Margie, like an alarm clock in the rush of time.

So Margie sipped her coffee, nibbled some toast, and cleared the table. She set aside George's scraps for their old Rottweiler, Sam, who was sleeping in more

and more these days. Then she scrambled up five eggs, turned the draining bacon, and sat down to savor her coffee and wait.

The flow to the main bathroom stopped. Joey. Margie sighed. She wasn't sure if it was boys in general or just Joey, but two active girls had not prepared her for the kind of mischief Joey brought. She devoutly hoped he would start taking an interest in girls soon. At least she could address that kind of crazy.

The bathroom door opened, and furtive steps squeaked toward the wrong room.

"Joey," she called. "Don't do anything in Kimmy's room that you'll live to regret."

No reply, but the footsteps changed course for safer quarters just as the private shower cut and the phone rang.

Margie got up, reached across the counter, and grabbed the receiver on the second ring.

"Hey-lo," Margie said.

"Margie, George just stopped in for a *News* and said he's heading for the station," Annie Lindner said in the space of one breath. "Anything interesting?" in the next breath. "He wouldn't say."

"Nothing worth space in your paper," Margie told the editor of the *Tottenville Tablet*, sold exclusively but not coincidentally at Annie's Cards 'N' Things on Main Street north of Amboy.

"My standards aren't that high," said Annie, who nonetheless and often counted Jardines and Rothsteins among her family tree. "It's not everyday someone treks to the City, so there's gotta be a reason."

"Ma!" Kim, from the bathroom, wailed. "Who is it?"

"It's Chris Tesereau asking me to the prom," Margie called back. "Just imagine!"

"What's this about you and Chris Tesereau?" Annie squawked in the receiver.

"A joke with Kimmy," Margie explained. "Anyway, George hadda check in at the union hall. That's all there is to it."

"Scout's honor?" Coincident with customer conversations.

"Scout's honor, Annie. Z'if we hadn't been cheerleader co-captains together, too."

"Well, he'll get a mention in the 'Village People' column, anyhow." Annie tried not to sound too disappointed, but Margie knew better.

"Lynnette'll be home from Albany Friday," Margie offered.

"Ooh, same weekend as Skeets Mathis's national championship race," Annie bubbled. "I'll bet she's excited."

"I imagine," Margie replied. "But he's in training and she's at school, so it's kinda hard--"

"Margie, please, have her call me as soon as she gets in. I gotta go now. Bye!"

Margie could never decide whether Annie was putting on the ditz to keep everyone at arm's length, or if that was Annie all over. Chilling thought.

Joey stormed down the stairs, appearing in yesterday's T-shirt and shorts. Margie smelled him before she saw him.

"The shirt," she said.

"Ya wannit autographed?" he asked, George's sandy hair and long, loose musculature with her sharp cheeks and eyes.

"Only thing I want autographed is your diploma so we can make you a ward of the state," Margie replied.

Joey peeled off Pink Floyd's prism-on-black and proffered it.

"Hamper," she said, noting that her boy was developing a man's torso. "Come down dressed and I'll feed you." As he shrugged and went back up she felt moved to add, "If I'm in a good mood." And inwardly wondered what depraved sort of femininity would be drawn to this teenaged slob. When Joey returned in a formal black Led Zeppelin shirt, she clamped down that train of thought. "Siddown, kid," she growled, and slung some eggs and bacon on his plate.

"I decided, Ma," Joey announced once his mouth was full, so it came out sounding like "Adhusaduhma" to an untrained ear. He sucked down the bolus before continuing. "I'm goin' out for the football team."

The moment Margie had dreaded the most since he'd learned to climb: All kids climb and fall, but only boys run full tilt into each other and call it sport. George would be thrilled.

"Oh, yes?" Margie said off-handedly. "When did you come to this decision?"

Joey shovelled eggs and bacon into the hopper at an industrial rate.

"Last week at the St. Joe's dance," Joey explained. "The Pirate guys had all the best chicks."

Margie suppressed a giggle at the thought of Joey and Des McVay running wallflower critiques at St. Joseph By The Sea's Summer Dance. There was hope yet.

"Uh-huh," she nodded. "Did they show off their knees?" she asked shrewdly. "The guys, I mean."

"Yeah, wow, it was grisly," Joey purred through full cheeks. "Some of em'r like veal sausage down there."

"Thanks, kid. And that's what you want?"

"Aw, I'll be a flanker. I'm quick. I got good hands. It'll just be me and the cornerback, man to man."

While Joey fueled this transport, Margie studied him and was forced to acknowledge that her baby was big enough to qualify. And to be thinking about girls.

"Well, I'm sure your father will want to hear about this when he gets back," she concluded.

"He already said I could use his pads," Joey said.

"When?"

"Before. D'j'a know he held the Pirate record for receptions for twenty years?"

"So I've been told," Margie said. "Not by your father, though. He's too modest."

Joey stopped gorging himself long enough for a loud sip of juice.

"How'd you get married if he was so modest?"

Good question, Margie thought, not sure whether to be delighted or sad.

"Your dad fit what I thought a man should be: tall, good looking, brave, modest, polite, funny ... and a terrific dancer."

Joey was grinning by the time she finished.

"Yeah, well, I'll work on the moves."

The kid did not lack confidence. Margie looked at the clock. Kimmy's rehearsal was scheduled for 7:30, three quarters of an hour and a good fifteen minute walk away.

"Hold the fort, Joey. I'm going to check on your sister."

Margie climbed the stairs with a slow, steady tread that minimized the touch of stiffness in her right hip. A premonitory echo of Dickens met her at Kimmy's door: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...." On the morning of the

rehearsal of her high school graduation, Kimmy was sprawled across her bed, golden hair covering her head like damp hay, sobbing her eyes out.

For once, Margie knew how she felt. She sat down on the edge of the bed and gently but firmly gathered her daughter's head to her lap and rhythmically smoothed the damp curls. For a long while Kimmy just bawled and shook in the soft pink shadows of Margie's dressing gown and Margie watched the red finches nesting in the turkey oak just outside. Kimmy's breath came longer, a hiccuping sob, a stirring, then a veiled peek of her grey irises in watery red lids.

"My life," Kimmy stated, "is over."

"I don't think so, babe," Margie said, "but it's sure about to change."

Kimmy's breath did another hip-hop, a sigh.

"I dunno what it is-- I useta hate school worse than liver, an' now I c-can't believe it's over, and--"

She did another melt before she could finish.

"Y'know? I'm gonna miss it. I'm gonna miss my friends. I--" Kimmy ran a back hand across her eyes. "I'm even gonna miss my teachers."

"Now you're kidding," reproved Margie.

Kimmy grinned suddenly, still ready to go either way.

"I guess." She sat up, curling mere inches from the mother she'd battled through adolescence. "Thing is, I'm not a brain like Lyn, I like Chris but no way I'm gonna marry him, and I don't know what else I wanna do, or what I can do. Y'know?"

Margie knew there were no jobs in Tottenville, nor anywhere else if you believed the news.

"Believe it or not, babe, you're way ahead of the game," she told her instead. "You know what you've got now, and how much you're gonna miss it. You know in

time to enjoy this moment while you're living it. If you didn't feel this pain now, honey, you'd be one of those people who just glide through the good times like they'd go on forever, then wake up years down the road married with kids and wondering where the good times went. You cherish this time, babe. Love it like there's no tomorra. 'Cause there's tomorra, okay, but it's gonna be different. Maybe even better."

Kimmy smiled, sniffled, and was just about to fall into her mother's arms when she saw her wristwatch.

"Seven!" she shrieked. "Seven o'clock and I'm not dressed!"

Margie sighed and rose.

"Just get dressed," she said. "I'll drive you."

\*

Margie waved Kim off to graduation practice at the old Tottenville field, the new school's field (actually in Huguenot) still just a sign in a fenced-in bog. The sign had been there long enough to graduate, Margie thought. Then she drove away, determined only not to go right home.

The Caprice wagon rumbled beneath the soft canopy of Yetman Avenue, past the great old houses Margie had grown up knowing as though friends, with no particular destination. The car turned right, and right again two blocks later, seeming to find its own way to the brown frame house with white lacework eaves where she'd spent her girlhood. There were bicycles and toys on the broad porch, toys of the Hirshman's kids, buyers no longer but residents, cagey enough to know that stuff left on the lawn was apt to be borrowed for good. Margie continued past. The Jeffers were still there, the parents anyway, and their yard had taken on the chokingly tended look of a retiree's garden.



Margie strained to conjure Fran Jeffers and Dale Cortauld and Helen Miraldi and young Margie Conagher playing killer volleyball off the bow of the big verandah. It got harder every year. Helen had moved, Dale had died of a botched hysterec-tomy, and Fran and she had fallen out after Fran had married Bill Peck of Peck's Marine Yards and moved to higher society. The Pecks had a salt-wood castle on the Great Kills waterfront now that always looked mildewy and aloof from the outside.

Margie turned her attention back to the road and stepped on the gas. The big wagon hesitated as though with a question, then lunged ahead. Now, where to go? It was still too early for much of anyplace to be open. Except for Annie's store.

As the Chevy traversed the quiet blocks, she realized how little Tottenville, the real heart of Tottenville, had changed since she was a girl. Only we get old, she reflected, turning left on Craig, toward Main Street. The youngest houses around here were from the turn of the century, windows tall as a person with shutters to match, fanlights over doors, lacework and gables and wrap-around porches, trees as old or older, trees which had been giants of her own distant girlhood.

She parked at the corner of Main next to the new County Savings Building, catty-cornered from the old County Savings Building, now Isle-End Auto Parts. Standing at the corner, she looked down at the two great changes in the Main Street she had known: the low straw-brick rectangle of the post office, and the garish marquee of the Fantasy Island Roller Rink, formerly the Town Theatre, where most Friday night dates began. Turning north, toward the train station, there was the same jumble of shopfronts bellied out of old houses, different names, different goods but the same setting, the skinny old crackerbox of the 123rd Precinct House standing off amid trees as large as its three narrow storeys. Within that long block, station parking had claimed every free patch of curb space. Margie

found herself scanning for George's Olds, but he probably had caught a closer spot on Butler or Bentley.

Annie's Cards 'N' Things was half of a plate glass storefront that was otherwise Frank's Barber Shop and the residence of the Frank Baldassaros. In Annie's share of window was a dusty gold-on-white Hallmark crest, a yellowed Russell Stover candies sign, and a carefully lettered placard announcing "**The Tottenville Tablet** sold here". In terms of business, the broadside ranked well behind newspapers, cigarettes, cards and sweets. This fact, like so many others, failed to staunch Annie's enthusiasm.

The thing that always surprised Margie about Annie's shop was its cool darkness in any weather. The old ceiling fans whisked the air between the front and side transoms, the front door open in all but the worst weather, the lights up at the tin ceiling saved for the deepest winter mornings. Stepping from the sharp sun of Main Street, Margie took a moment to adjust to the shade, a moment where Annie on her perch behind the front counter had the upper hand.

"*Margie*," from the shadowy Annie. "Long time no speak."

"Hey, Annie," Margie said. "I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd stop by."

Annie took shape behind the counter, round and pale beneath a fall of loose white gold curls, merry blue eyes set wide and credulous above the narrow wedge of her nose.

"So sit," Annie said. "Take a load off. Coffee?"

Margie perched on a stool propping open the counter's swing gate, behind the candy display.

"Sure."

Annie drew a coffee from a caterer's urn and handed Margie the cup. She had recently started selling coffee to her morning customers.

"Milk?"

"Please."

Margie watched her friend's precise, dainty movements, and wondered again at the turnings of life that led her to sip coffee one morning with her former cheerleading co-captain and arch-rival. Annie had been a golden stunner, sharp as a pin, great bod. And she had never married.

"Thanks," Margie said, and sipped the light, warm coffee. "I just dropped the kids off at school and I was driving around thinking about the neighborhood, and Fran, and Helen, and Dale..."

"Oh, gee," responded Annie, "it's been years since I saw Helen, and Dale gone all this time... And the bastard who killed her now the head of obstetrics at South Shore General..."

"Yeah," Margie said glumly as Annie jotted a note on a heavily scribbled steno pad next to the phone.

"In fact," Annie continued, "the only one of that group I'm still in touch with -- besides you -- is Fran Peck."

"I liked her better when she was a Jeffers," Margie said with the wistful look at the bright door.

"I know what you're saying," Annie affirmed. "She only talks to me because I'm a twelfth-generation Jardine and a fourth-generation Rothstein. It's like that with the *nouveau-riche*."

"I wouldn't know," Margie said.

Annie gave her a canted look.

"Hey, why so glum, Marg? You've got three gorgeous kids, one in college and one on the way there, a good house, a good dog, a good man--"

Margie burst a laugh.

"No wonder you're not married," she said.

Annie smiled thinly and waved a tapered hand.

"Who's got the time?" she asked.

They both drank coffee. Anyone going to the station for work had since departed, and it was still early for the morning moms. Annie and Margie had the dim store, all of bright, whispering Main Street, to themselves.

"Thing is," Margie said out of the blue, "Kim's not going to college just yet." She realized at once how foolish it was to confide any such thing to Annie, who was practically guaranteed to put it about. Still, it wasn't really a secret, and at least Annie would understand what it meant to her.

"Then," Annie paused, sipped, resumed with delicacy, "she'll be staying in town?"

"No jobs in town," Margie said.

"Mm, maybe it's not so bad as all that. For instance," Annie turned now and drew closer, as if they were discussing Donnie McVay's back-seat techniques, "let's say I needed an assistant. To mind the store while I'm chasing down stories. Count, bundle and close, maybe even a little apprentice reporting."

Margie had another jolt of muddy coffee.

"Let's say you did. How much would it pay?"

"Two dollars an hour, off the books, for noon till closing," Annie replied.

Margie met Annie's eyes, and they both burst out laughing. Then they leaned across the remaining space and hugged.

"That's so sweet of you, Annie," Margie said. "I'll have her call you."

At that warm and private moment, the doorway filled with cops.

"Morning, Annie. The coffee maker blew," said Sargeant Pat Patrick. "Hope you got lots, or we'll have to close down."

"Hiya, Pat," Margie said.

"H'lo, Margie," replied the Sargeant. "How's things?"

"Good," Margie said. "Yourself?"

"How many?" Annie asked.

"Twenny, for starters," said Sargeant Patrick. "Can't complain. And if I did, who'd listen?"

"Twenty? Whoa," Annie said. "Tell you what -- just take the whole thing."

"Annie, you're a doll. How much do I owe ya?"

"Just keep track, and pay me when you bring it back. *Clean*," she added.

"You got it, Annie. Okay, boys -- and go easy!"

"And, Pat," Annie smiled, stepping aside for the coffee bearers in blue, "I'll stop by later to talk about the precinct house's wiring."

Patrick rolled his eyes.

"Whatever gets the brass to do something about it," he sighed. "I'm all yours."

With a moan of air brakes, a shadow filled the doorway. The blue honor guard left, hailing, "Hey, Bobby, how's your car?"

"Fuel pump," came the answer. "I should have it done today."

"Yeah, right." A receding group chuckle.

Bobby Cutler momentarily sliced a silhouette nearly the length of the doorway, with a carton of candy on each shoulder so that his shadow looked like a balance scale. His already thin lips remained compressed as his wide-set eyes blinked into focus.

"Morning, Annie," he said. "Where'd'ya want these?"

"Right on the counter, Bobby. I'm running low on Three Musketeers."

Bobby set the boxes down, then spotted Margie behind the counter.

"Oh, g'morning, Mrs. Smyte," he said.

"Morning, Bobby," Margie said. "How's your folks?"

"Oh, okay," Bobby said, concentrating on removing a cigarette from his pack and lighting it. "I saw your husband going t' the station on my way to the warehouse."

"Yeah," Margie said carelessly. "He's got business in the City."

"Huh," Bobby registered.

"So I hear that you'll have your car on the road soon," Annie said.

"Hope so," replied Bobby, warming to his favorite subject. "It's a classic. '65 was the first full year of production. In a few years, a mint condition Mustang will be like, forget it. More than a new car."

"Ford sold a lot of them, Bobby," Margie teased, not for the first time.

"Don't matter," Bobby said emphatically. "Ford sold a zillion Model Ts. How many of them you see around?"

"Be sure to bring it over," Annie said.

"I will," Bobby replied. "Maybe give Lyn a ride when she gets back."

This last to Margie, who also caught Annie's significant look.

"You'll have to ask her," Margie said. She wasn't sure how brightly Lyn's flame burned for Skeets Mathis, with Lyn's time away at school and Steven's endless training. She had stopped keeping score by the time Lyn was voted class valedictorian.

"I will," Bobby persisted, lips set after who knew how many put-downs from Lyn. "Bye, Annie, Miz Smyte."

So set was his purpose, so firm his resolve, Bobby nearly ran splat into one of the elder McVay twins.

"Good morning," the youth said lightly, all Donnie McVay's charm from the very cradle, after shouldering past the obscurely despised Bobby.

"Morning," Margie replied, scrutinizing the little finger of his left hand. For all their compact, sandy-haired, green-eyed identicality, Declan had taken a football straight on his left pinky at age six, leaving it with a slight crook that Donal's counterpart lacked. Sure enough, the hand on the counter ended with a small sickle. "Deke," she concluded.

"How's your brother?" Annie said, her twin-spotting gambit.

Declan tilted his head in a listening posture.

"Fine," he said. "He 'n' our Dad'll be refinishing the Oak Room bar today."

"Hot one today for that," Margie said without much sympathy.

"Yeah," said Declan McVay. "I'll be dipping the chairs and tables."

Margie nodded, all too familiar with the sharp perfume of her cross-street neighbor's vat.

"What can I do for ya?" Annie asked.

"Pack o' Winston 100s and, let's see..." Declan counted out eleven wax-wrapped pieces of Bazooka bubble gum. "These here for me and the kids."

"How is everybody?" Annie chatted while completing the transaction. The McVays always made good copy.

"Fine," said Declan. "Our Dennis is going to work with old man Grauer at the ice cream shop."

"No!" Annie exclaimed. "He wouldn't have any helper since his missus died last year."

"Well," grinned Declan, "he's got one now. Starting tomorrow, in fact."

"I'll have to get George to take me for a sundae," Margie said, "when he gets back."

"And," Deke leaned closer, "Little Donnie's gone and upped with the Air Force!"

"Get outta here!" Annie said. "War's over! Why'd he do that?"

"Duty, maybe?" Margie plied politely.

"Drugs," stated Deke. "Could be the best thing for him. He'd'a known from me and Donal that the Navy wouldn't have him."

"I don't see him and planes in the same vision," Annie admitted.

"Only the jet jocks and mechanics rate at all there," Deke confided. "Trust me, between all the armed services, the Air Force is down the bottom of the pecking order."

"Mixed metaphor excused," chirped Annie, scribbling on her pad.

Winona Mercer wheeled baby Holly into Annie's shop and Annie's attention turned to the 14th generation Mercer. Margie felt a sudden restlessness at the sight of new mother and child.

"Gotta go," she sighed generally, and made her getaway with Deke. They parted ways out front, where Deke's green El Camino pickup squatted with a quantity of bar furniture in its bed. As Deke chased off before a plume of blue exhaust, Margie wandered off in the other direction, away from the store, the car, Amboy Road, home. One foot before the other into the shimmering street, its morning already bleached as sand, swimming images in shaded windows of a woman in loose clothing who appeared to be lost in the current dragging her from glass to glass. Margie examined the wraith as a stranger, pinched about the eyes and mouth, more fleshy than any face she remembered. She stopped and studied and tried not to ask herself any questions she couldn't answer.



A sharp gleam in the distance caught her attention. Margie thought *train* before she spotted the cyclist approaching. She could see the strong, easy pumps, the head hung between straight arms, before she recognized Eliot Keane, the Bug Man. Eliot lived just around the corner from home; no, really he lived in the woods and swamps girding Tottenville, and enshrined the butterflies and beetles and what else he found back at the house. In the ten years he'd been there, Margie doubted that they'd spoken on ten occasions. Yet he'd always been charming in his reserved Yankee way, rationing his open Rs to those Villagers who might understand his passion for insects.

Margie was sorry when he sped by with just a courtly salute. Maybe the mystery of Eliot's obsession was what she needed, or something like it, to staunch the draining of her motherhood.

\*

Margie rounded the weedy stretch of Arthur Kill Road into Johnston. She didn't feel up to the lonely waiting of the train tracks a block further on, and wasn't keen on passing Annie's store again on her way back to the car. Here, just a block off Main Street, were tall, rough-skinned houses with trim, unfenced lawns and colonnades of ancient oaks.

The children were up now, their high, querulous voices disputing breakfast and siblings, crashing in on adult conversations. A tiny girl with wild blonde hair monster-stepped down her driveway; seeing Margie, she cooed "Hi-i," and ran back laughing.

Yeah, they're a handful, Margie thought, but no one had to tell me to enjoy each age of each unique child.

In the cloud of this mood she drifted on, right into Winona Mercer and Holly.

"Oh, hi, Miz Smyte," Winona said in her scratchy cheerful way. "I just saw y'z down at Annie's store. How ya doin'?"

Margie allowed that she was fine. And then, of course, down to business, making a fuss over the swaddled baby sleeping in the stroller.

"What a sweetie," Margie observed, and the tiny girl sure looked it. Despite the newborn pudge crowding her features, there was the clear beginning of Winona's forthright chin, high cheekbones, and porcelain complexion. The fingertips poking from a loose fold of blanket looked like delicate kernels of Indian corn, matching the wispy cornsilk hair on the round head. "You went Caesarian?" Margie asked.

"Yeah," Winona sighed sweetly. "I was kinda bummed cos, like, I wasn't there, but I was kinda glad because it hurt *bad*. Thing is, she's fine and I'm okay."

"And how's Nick?"

Winona pulled a cigarette and Bic lighter from a pink diaper bag.

"Oh, he's gone," she said, snapping a light.

Margie's jaw actually dropped.

"Gone?" she echoed.

Winona waved the cigarette away from the carriage.

"Out of the picture," she said serenely. "He was great as a cousin, but as a husband he's a cheatin' bastard. I mean, I'm gettin' *our baby* cut outta me at South Shore Memorial, and he's off doin' Jill DeAngelis."

Winona paused for a drag. Margie had nothing to say. Winona smiled down at Holly.

"She chunked him, too," she told the infant.

"Oh," Margie managed. She groped for a way out. "You staying with your mom?"

"For now," Winona said. "She's being real weird about it, but."

"How so?"

Winona blew out a long, exasperated lungful of smoke.

"Oh, she's sayin' I should take him back, for the good of the baby, he's a good guy, a hard worker, he made a mistake, men are weak, he's really sorry, this shit that shit-- I'm sorry, Miz Smyte, she just gets me so pissed off-- and if you ask me, she's been listenin' too much to the Serrats instead of her own kid, who was married to the jerk."

Just as Margie had despaired of a graceful way to break off, the baby stirred. Tiny fists the size of walnuts poked clear of the receiving blanket, which shifted side to side as enormous violet eyes blinked open in the shade of the stroller. She gave Margie a wide, blank stare. The cherub face screwed up, and Margie braced herself for that cry with a direct line to the viscera, but it was just a yawn, ending with a contented little "Um." Winona finished her cigarette as Margie and Holly gazed at each other.

"She's up," Margie said softly.

"Yeah," cooed Winona. "Ain't she a doll?" She gathered up the tiny package, baby, blankets and all. "No trouble at all."

Margie said, "I'll let you go. Take care."

Margie finished the circuit to the car and sat for a while, thinking dirty diapers, two a.m. feedings, thinking first steps, boo-boos, tantrums, playgrounds and parties, the last check every night of sweet young faces at rest, thinking without letup, I've spent my life at this. And now?

\*

Margie looked up at the kitchen clock when she heard the mailbox lid creak. She was astonished to see it was already half past noon. Where did the morning go?

She propped the sponge mop against the counter and turned down Buck Owens on the radio, crossing the dining room to the front foyer just in time to see the front door open and George appear.

George, big, solid, sheepish, a little melted, sweat boosting the tang of the Old Spice as she dropped the blue spiral of her morning and ran into his arms. They stood fixed in a Grade A kiss, door open to the whole world of Satterlee Street. George taste sour with old onions and hops, her old bear nonetheless.

They broke for breath, grabbed a good eyeful of each other, and turned as one to see Roy Forch the mailman sort of slinking up the walk.

"Ts okay, Roy," George said. "She don't bite."

Margie bopped him one.

Roy put the rubber-banded bundle into George's waiting hand, mumbled "Have a nice day," and retreated, beet red.

"I believe he's a virgin," George murmured, then turned back to Margie and smiled. "I should leave home more often."

"No," replied Margie, "you should not."

She reached past him and swung the door shut.

\*

"So, you got home quick," she said later, upstairs, in bed.

"Yup," George said, snuggling her closer. "I made good connections all the way, the 6:30 train, the 7:30 boat, then the Lexington line up--"

"You took the subway?" Margie recoiled. "What were you thinking?"

"Everybody took the subway," George said, a big hand drawing her back. "B'sides, you saw that traffic, you'd take the subway too. I'd still be on my way there if I took a bus." She resettled, with some residual resistance. His fingers walked the freckles on her shoulder. "As it was, I was the first one there. Only

hadda wait a half-hour. They guy asked me a few questions, looked at my papers, and told me to make an appointment with the union doctor. Since he was a block away, I called from the union office and he took me right away."

Margie turned to him and propped her head on a folded arm.

"So what'd he say?"

George scanned the ceiling over to the window, and beyond.

"Said if I did any more heavy lifting I'd better have traction ready. But since I'm a foreman I don't have to lift, I can tell someone else to do it." George's voice was flat with disapproval. "I told him that's easier to say than do, big as I am. To which he replied, 'It's your back.'"

"So," Margie concluded, "you're going back to work. No more lollygagging."

"No," George said mournfully, "no more lollygagging."

"You were getting bored," Margie nudged. "Admit it."

"Not bored," George said. "Peaceful. Just ... so." He sighed. "I guess bored woulda come."

Margie snuggled closer, stroking him.

"Hey, sugar bear," she said, "wanna test your back again?"

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