

# Weekends in New York—A Memoir

Henry Roth

April 1939, Saturday night

I WALKED east to Central Park West, and there, across from the park, turned south. It was now 8:30 P.M. I hadn't realized that the many-storied apartment houses along the way were occupied by well-to-do Jews, until I saw a car backing up before one of them, and backing up too hard, so hard it struck the front bumpers of the parked sedan behind quite forcibly. The uniformed doorman came out, and said jocularly: "Boy, are they gonna sue you, are they gonna sue you, Dr. Gottlieb." Unperturbed and smiling, Dr. Gottlieb got out of the vehicle. And I, looking about, saw that most of the people on the avenue appeared to be also Jewish, and, as far as I could judge, affluent.

At 57th Street I turned east, aimlessly, gaze sliding from face to face in the passing crowd. When I reached Broadway, my attention was drawn to quite a large group of people on the northeast corner in front of Weber & Heilbronner's men's furnishings. I crossed the street, and drifted over, and found a comfortable prop to lean against: the parcel drop of the U.S. mail. The crowd had gathered about a cluster of five women and two men. The women wore headdresses made of white muslin or linen, trailing behind their shoulders, like that worn by members of the Red Cross. The men wore street clothes. One, a tall, cadaverous, aging man, with faded rusty hair, carried a Bible; the other, short, wiry, with dark eyes snapping and intense, carried a briefcase as well as a Bible. The women, for all their white headdresses, were unmistakably plebeian. One was a large, Scottish-looking woman with strawy eyelashes, almost colorless, who shut her eyes when she sang; another, with pinched lips and sharp nose, looked Polish;

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another, a matron and stout, with graying hair, reminded me vaguely of a chambermaid I had seen in a hotel. The fourth, who bore a tambourine, was a Negro woman with very taut, fine brown skin like polished briar. The fifth, a brunette, was quite pretty—and petite. Their backs were turned to me, for they were facing the street, but I saw their faces from time to time as their heads swayed in song. The usual New York crowd had collected, and they stood about amused and nudging one another. I couldn't make out what the evangelists were singing, except that the words God and Jesus resounded again and again from the music of the hymn, the music of some popular tune. The Negro woman led the choir, and her rhythms and husky voice were enough to hold anyone's attention. I thought of my old friend Bill Loem, those months ago—years ago, they seemed now—when we stood in the park in Cincinnati, and listened to that same kind of religious meeting, and his voice had become blurred and harsh when we turned away, and he wept, stalwart of the Communist party, steeled in the struggle, wept out of sheer nostalgia—and never forgave me for having witnessed his tears and his grief, and his betrayal of weakness.

I looked about. Behind the revivalists, in the Weber & Heilbronner show window, gray suits and gray felt hats with braided leather hatbands were on display, and red socks. To the south, across the street, burned the orange neon sign of an auto salesroom: NASH. Cafés and drugstores glared on the crowd. The huge Coca-Cola ad aloft bubbled and glowed. Dimmed headlights of cars passed. All about droned New York's dense, intricate din. A circus wagon, horse-drawn, clattered by. The ceaseless Saturday night throng streamed in both directions toward the group that had gathered on the sidewalk, like a solid eddy about the little cluster, some filtering through, some skirting, some tarrying out of curiosity, augmenting the bystanders. Two thousand years ago, I mused, that little knot of evangelists might have been enrolled among the martyrs, might have been the founders of the church. But now, what? Fanatics, forlorn fanatics. Still, it was interesting to wonder what that gilded lady would have looked like—she wore a black hat with the high white peak like an ice-cream sundae, and was wrathfully el-

bowing the little troupe of hymn-singers out of her way as she tried to get through—what she would have looked like, elbowing the sainted apostles on the streets of Jerusalem.

Poor nuts, I thought, some new sect, and decided to move on; but then I remembered I had nowhere to go, and so changed my mind, and stayed. Strange, how I disliked watching this kind of spectacle. It embarrassed me terribly: humanity exhibiting its pathetic manias in public. I forced myself to stay on. I thought: well, see it through. The crowd was so scornful and cynical, something might happen; something might happen that would bring grist to my mill; it was my duty to stay on and see it happen. Besides, there was a certain tension in the air. Blasé New Yorkers usually ignored this sort of thing, but this crowd was hostile, had deliberately stopped to jeer. I could feel my own quickening pulse responding to the latent resistance of the onlookers.

Presently, the singing came to a close, and the large Scottish-looking woman came to the center of the circle and began to preach. She quoted from the Gospels, proclaimed the imminence of Christ's second coming and the end of the world. Her delivery was poor, her voice without control; she stopped frequently in the midst of dire prophecy to fumble for words, alternating between hysteria and the uncertain speech of a woman of humble background. And now entered the spoiler—pushed his way toward the center of the semicircle and began his antics. Sober, he might have been a tractable enough grocery clerk for the A & P. Drunk, he was the irrepressible clown: an Irishman, if the brogue that cropped up in his speech was any indication.

*[Ireland (I muse, sit back today and muse) once fighting a savage, sanguinary war for its freedom—let's call it "freedom" in quotes—for its independence from England, for its sovereignty—leave out all the emotional shibboleths and griefs (for its sovereignty, and not one that would entail the annihilation of England, as the PLO is pledged by covenant to win at the expense of Israel)—leave out all the highly charged wrongs and enmity, Ireland fighting for its right to a distinct entity (the South fighting for its right to secede, with its institutions, from the Union). Place the whole thing in a perspective of economics: Ireland fighting to rid itself of the British investor, the British landowner, businessman, industrialist, banker, in order to keep its wealth and resources from flowing out of the country, and in the hands of its own landowners, investors, bankers, and industrialists. Whatever. How could Joyce so separate himself from the fierce struggle of his countrymen for their independence—and focus his attention on a single day in June 1904, and exclude, while writing about it, all the bloodshed and turmoil between the inception of his work and its completion. What specious claptrap is this silence, exile, cunning (borrowed without acknowledg-*

*ment—was it from some religious order?). What a fraud, what a cover-up! Ah, but friend (I now continue to myself), didn't you do the same thing? Fled, deserted the struggle of your people, more afflicted than the Irish ever were, for a land of their own, their own land. Indifferent, averse, scornful, opposed on principle, adherent of Marxist internationalism, you thought. How can you take Joyce to task? In what way were you different?—Until June '67, when all the diffuse fears of the fate of the Jews, the scarce-credible rumors of a new Holocaust, condensed, sublimated into terrible dread, a terrible woe. Until then, you had been a party-line purveyor, maybe an increasingly uneasy one, but still a party-line servitor. How were you different (cringing henchman of a paranoid), seeking to dissociate yourself from fellow-Jews, but instead were a fervent defender of "the oppressed and dispossessed and inoffensive" Arabs, the anti-nationalist internationalist—as Joyce, the universalist, quit Ireland (and never wrote about anything else). You found a haven for your alienation from your people in Marxist doctrine, as Joyce in universal culture, and both proved sterile. I seem to feel a difference between us, and yet can't put my finger on it: why did I eventually become partisan, not of the Diaspora I shunned, but of Judaism's rebirth in Israel; while he never reunited with a new Ireland? Perhaps it was because I came later in the day, or because I could never create so coruscating a blind alley as he, with his dazzling virtuosity, a mausoleum to lie in. No, my fate was more like Pound's; to live long enough so that the warp of time became manifest, so inexorably contrary to one's views one had to repudiate them—even repudiate the self, though grown old, testify to the truth though grown old. I am only furious at myself for having taken so long, so ponderously long to have effected the change—to the degree that I have, however inept, inadequate. One Israeli lad, ambushed and slain in Lebanon, is one of my kin, a surrogate son, ambushed and killed in Lebanon—and the same holds true for the way my beloved M. feels, distressed and sorrowing at the news. Oh, I know the question that will be asked: What are we doing in Lebanon? What about the claims of the PLO to an independent state? What about Israel? Her security, her existence. Who is going to ride above this battle, look down at the warring sides with Olympian detachment?—only Olympians. That sort of detachment spells paralysis; has spelled it for me these four decades and more; compels me now to intrude upon my own work, disrupt its unity for lack of time—for I know I shall never have time to set forth my views later, in their due place, neither the time nor the strength, perhaps not even the faculties. . . .]*

“WHAT'RE YOU doin' here?” the drunk heckled the Scottish-looking woman as she preached. “Will you tell us: what do

you think you're doin'? Thish no church." And when she refused to heed him, he alternated ogling her with gapings of mock solemnity, lolling his head. She closed her eyes to blot him out. He grinned in triumph, turned to the crowd, and brayed like a donkey. The crowd guffawed. Encouraged, he went the rounds of the little group, trying out his big grin, and feigning fright at each stony response. He winked broadly at the pretty brunette, and said: "You don't want to be here. No-o-o." He rocked back with besotted earnestness. The little man with the briefcase and Bible gave him a shove. And ugly in an instant, the drunk turned on the other: "Whatsa matter with you?" But before the confrontation could develop further, the Negro woman struck her tambourine, and the group began to sing. Song cemented them, and the drunk wandered back to the inner ring of spectators.

And now the little man, with a swift movement, set his briefcase against the base of the lamppost and strode out to the middle of the circle. He had been a sinner, he declared, but through the holy power of Christ Jesus he had been saved. He spoke with an accent, something middle-European, but an accent I couldn't identify. Once again the drunk stepped out of the audience into the open center. With a Yiddish accent he mimicked the preacher: "You read the Bible, Mister? Oy, he reads the Bible. You gotta Bible, Abie?" He flapped upturned palms. The crowd laughed. Individuals turned completely around in transports of mirth, and stamped their feet.

"Bombs will rain from the air," shouted the little man. "Airplanes will drop bombs from the air, and whole cities will be laid waste, as it is written: the world will be destroyed before the coming of Christ!"

"Whadda ya know?" said the drunk. "Abie knows all about it."

"The hand of God will take care of him," said the Negro woman.

"Is he your boyfriend?" the drunk leered at her.

She turned her head away. He lurched toward the pretty brunette: "Is he your boyfriend?"

"Don't pay him no heed, Sister," the Negro woman admonished.

"Who is it doesn't feel in his heart the coming of the last days?" the preacher shouted. "Daily, daily the end approaches. Armageddon draws nigh, the doom is made ready—Will you be ready for that day? Come now to Christ Jesus. Tomorrow will be too late! I implore, I implore—" he brandished the Bible: "Heed the words of Revelation! Seek Christ Jesus for your soul's sake!"

"**H**E's your boyfriend," the drunk reeled toward the woman with the pinched lips and sharp nose, the woman I thought was Polish. And suddenly she uncoiled, so suddenly only the sound gave proof of the act; she slapped him.

He staggered away toward the curb. The Polish woman followed. And slap! "You win," he grinned, whined comically, ducked. "You win, lady." And slap! And again. "I'll take it from a woman," he took shelter behind fending arms. "I'll take it from a woman."

"I'll show you!" the Polish woman swung again.

"That's enough, Sister Mary!" the Negro woman cried out. "Leave him alone."

But Sister Mary had tasted blood. White head-dress flying, she pursued the retreating drunk, who still repeated with each blow: "I'll take it from you because you're a woman."

"Sister Mary!" the other women cried. "Sister Mary, come back!"

"I'll show him!"

"Leave him alone, Sister Mary," the Negro woman followed her sister revivalist. "Leave him alone. He's troubled in spirit."

Reluctantly, Sister Mary desisted.

"I took it because she was a woman," said the drunk.

"This man claims to be a Roman Catholic!" the little man shouted. "And yet he mocks prophecy, the clear prophecy of the Bible foretelling the ruin of the world and the end of days. He claims to be a Roman Catholic, and yet he blasphemes the name of God. What does this show? It shows that salvation lies neither in Catholicism, nor Protestantism, nor Judaism, but in Christ Jesus alone. Now! Seek salvation! Now! Before the coming of the Almighty's wrath!"

A well-spoken refined-looking woman, with hennaed hair and wearing glasses, had come over to the drunk: "You look like a decent man," she addressed him. "Why don't you leave them alone? I don't believe in what they say any more than you do. They're poor, troubled people, but they're perfectly harmless, and should be left alone."

"I took it, didn't I lady?"

"Yes, but now you ought to go on, and leave them to preach their message."

"Yes, you have no right to disturb them," seconded a portly man with a neat mustache. "They're just trying to tell in their way they feel something's wrong. It would do you good to listen."

"Who're you to tell me I've got no right?" the drunk demanded truculently. "I'll take it from a woman. I won't take it from a man."

"I'm not asking you to take anything," argued the man with the neat mustache. "I'm just asking you to grant these people their rights of free speech, and not to disturb them."

"Please, be quiet!" the little man rushed over.

"I got as much right to be here as you got," the drunk edged closer to the man with the neat mustache.

"Certainly. It's a free country."

"Well, who the hell're you to tell me what to do?"

"I'm just trying to be your friend."

"I don't want you for a friend—there!"

"All right, but don't disturb these people."

"Will you please be quiet!" the little man shouted at the top of his voice. And other voices in the crowd joined in: "Leave them alone, you! Go on, beat it!"

"Try to stop me," the drunk defied with surly self-assurance.

"I won't try to stop you," said the man with the neat mustache. "I'll get a cop."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, I will."

The drunk rocked on his heels for a space. "I'll show you I'm a sport." He drew from his pocket a handful of small change. "I'll show I'm a sport." He sorted out the nickels, and pocketed the rest, and stepped into the center of the circle again. "I wanna make a contribution," he said to the little man, whose voice had become hoarse with preaching. "A good-will offer." The little man avoided him. The drunk swayed after the other. "I wanna make a little contribution—"

"In the name of Jesus, go away!" the little man struck at the proffering hand, sending the coins flying to the sidewalk.

"Where's my nickels?" the drunk wagged his head. "All right, here's a dime."

And now, *deus ex machina* in blue, the cop arrived: a sergeant, a huge man who hulked above everyone else. He stretched out his arms, and seemed to encompass everyone there. "What's goin' on here?" he asked. "What's the meanin' o' this?" He seemed as pained as he was perplexed.

"We are preaching here to save our fellow men before the coming of the end," said the little man, who scarcely reached the sergeant's chest. "We are preaching the warning of Revelation. We are preaching the Gospel," and he added quietly, "the word of God."

"Sure, I've nothing against the word of God," said the sergeant, "but it's an inconvenience to traffic."

"We have a right to stand here," said the Negro woman.

"That you have," said the sergeant. "But you've no right to obstruct the sidewalk."

"It ain't us; it's him," the Polish woman pointed at the drunk. "That one."

"Well, go over to Columbus Circle," the sergeant stretched his arms even wider. "There's more room there."

None of the revivalists would budge.

"Please!" the sergeant beseeched the little man. He wavered.

"Please!" the sergeant repeated. "I know it's important for your message to reach the people, but this ain't the place to do it on the sidewalk in front of Weber & Heilbronner."

The little man nodded, took a firmer grip of his Bible, and prepared to leave. "Mister, is that your briefcase?" I asked. He regarded me wordlessly, picked up his briefcase.

With the sergeant in the rear, herding them south toward Columbus Circle, they made their departure, the drunk trailing them, grinning happily.

June 1939, Saturday night

TO BEGIN at the beginning—more or less—I had a note from M. informing me that her father had said he would take us all out to dinner (instead of our having dinner at her sister B.'s, as she had planned); and would I call for her at 6:00. We would then go to B. and her husband J.'s at 6:15 for a snifter, and the parents would come at 7:00. I quit writing at 4:45. (An outline of a sketch, this time perhaps salable, of an incident connected with my swimming with the Irish toughies of 119th Street off bare-ass beach in the Harlem River. Interesting, the kind of co-existence I'd established with my demon—my obsessive anxiety—provided I didn't strain too hard—or too close to the self.) I bathed—and shaved with a new blade. Then with necktie in my pocket, and not yet daring to risk putting on a clean shirt, but dressed in my faded, blue polo shirt, blue slacks (Macy's basement bargain) and the Wanamaker English jacket of gray plaid—of my old benefactor Edith's bounty—my tan shoes, none too sturdy in appearance any longer, and my gray, weathered felt hat, in want of cleaning and blocking, and with small vent-hole at the crimp, I sallied forth. At the last moment I remembered that M.'s note instructed me to: bring pipe. So I pocketed pipe, and in typical, absent fashion, deciding not to take the Bull Durham cigarette tobacco along, left the pipe in my room instead, and had to return and fetch it. I bought a small tin of more expensive pipe tobacco, Revelation, 18¢, out of the \$1.40 I had left until my next Home Relief check a week or more hence. Then I knocked at M.'s window.

She wore a print, completely sleeveless. She had cut the half-sleeves away when they tore at the seams under the armpit. The material was of some cottony stuff printed with a design of little brown and black circles. She smiled at me from the other side of the open steel door; I looked at her questioningly, and indicated her room. She said: "It's safe." We went in, and she clung to me, and told me the day's news: J. and B. had been there, also Mr. and Mrs. P., her parents. They had all had a light lunch there, Swiss cheese and Jewish rye bread, and liked it. She had been copying music before I arrived, and one of the sheets was still wet, and I almost touched it—lying on the table under the gooseneck lamp—but she said just in time: "It's still wet, darling." It looked beautiful, though (her cantata which she was preparing to have blueprinted), the black India ink notes contrasting strongly with the thin white paper. She remarked on the three-pointed pen she used, its tendency to clot: the ink coated

the pen like a paint. I suggested that the musical notation would make a fetching design for a cloth. She thought she could make a million dollars on the idea. "I have a shirt here," I said, producing my necktie. She got the shirt out of the drawer, and I matched it with the tie. "How do you think it will look?" The shirt was gray (also of Edith's provenance), the tie blue.

"It's better than what you have on," she said.

"Oh, I wasn't going to wear that," I said.

"I know, darling."

I doubted that shirt and tie matched, but she thought they would do, saying my best colors were gray and blue. I said I'd go out for a walk until 6:00, and she said she'd dress meanwhile. She clung to me and shed a tear. I shook her and told her not to be silly. She promised to behave when I came back. And before I left showed me a letter from the head of her department, in which she described the consternation of the girls at W. College on learning that M. would not be teaching there next fall.

I walked west to Lexington Avenue, and loitered before the antique shops, the chinaware and chairs, and ruminated on my writing: whether I had recovered enough equanimity to tackle the sketch—*Broker* (how apt the subliminal self was)—that had sent me into the night on the verge of hysteria or whether to elaborate the Harlem River incident. Mused, trying to find graphic analogies for my state—if I ever had to describe it to someone: short circuit, but not the apocalyptic one of my novel. A kind of hairline crack, say, in the distributor of a car, or perhaps a spark plug, that diverted just enough mental current from its destination to impair performance; something of the sort. It was always there, deflecting the mind, draining it, depriving it of its natural élan. It would never allow again any long, integrated literary work, never could sustain one. And I would have to live with it now and from now on . . . live with it, become inured to it, become resigned. . . .

I RETURNED to M.'s room a few minutes after six. She was dressed in her homemade hopsacking suit out of oaten-colored cloth that I had helped her fit, or hang, crawling around her ankles with foot-rule and pins. And on her head, canted pertly and with a black ribbon trailing in the back, she wore her little brown postage stamp of a tam. I washed my face and neck again to insure as cool an appearance as possible, and slipped into my newly-laundered gray shirt. She buttoned the back of the collar after my tie was properly adjusted and we sat down to compose ourselves before setting out.

We decided not to imbibe any alcoholic beverages at J. and B.'s in order to stay cool, and neither of us felt we needed any.

"Why is B. so nervous about their coming here?" I asked. I knew there had been considerable par-

ental resistance to her marriage to J.; but I thought that was all over with; that he was accepted now, a successful free-lance photographer.

"No," M. said. "There's always been that antagonism between the two: B. gets like that"—M. clenched her fist—"whenever she sees Mother. Mother has a strong tendency to be masterful, and B. has resisted her all the way. There were some awful scenes at home." We stood up, and prepared to leave.

"What about you?" I asked. "Did you get along?"

"Oh, yes, she approved of me. I did all the things she wanted me to, or almost." We walked out into the fine late afternoon. "Got top grades in school. Phi Beta Kappa in my junior year."

"And now you're about to do something more outrageously unconventional than all your—your siblings." We entered the shadow of the covered way under the new construction, and she took my hand.

"This is one block where I'm sure your collar won't wilt," she said.

"That's right. I ought to be grateful for Vermont covered bridges on New York sidewalks. You know something? You don't burp any more."

"Yes, J.'s noticed that too."

"What's its miraculous disappearance due to?"

"I don't know. You're going to say it's you, smarty-pants."

"Of course, the only new thing in the picture is my taking you to bed."

"But that's no longer new, darling," she said silkily.

We laughed. I admired—and envied without covetousness—the easy, unruffled flow of her thought, the tranquillity of her riposte that still served its purpose without heat or satiric barb. Ah, to have been bred that way, been brought up that way. It wouldn't have done me any good to have run away from home at age twelve. As the seedling was bent—or however that maxim phrased it. God, there was so much to think about when I was with her, so much that reflected itself back to myself in the glass of her constancy, revealing about me that which made me shake my head in gloomy distaste again and again.

We went into the elevator, and up two flights, and rang the doorbell. B. looked pretty, tip-tilted nose and blonde hair, and comely in a kind of postcard-pale yellow dress made of something rayony, and topped by a small jacket that for some reason seemed to go with the word bolero. And J. wore a brown suit of gabardine, and a chocolate-brown shirt with a bold plaid McCrossen tie. I was relieved to note that he was not wearing a white shirt (a white shirt was something Mother favored—that, and tobacco pipes). His shirt was open, necktie loose. Their phonograph was playing as we came into the living room, the "Beer Barrel Polka," J.'s favorite for the week. Their living room was large, nicely furnished, semi-

*moderne*, plate-glass coffee table on wrought-iron legs and Scandinavian chairs. J.'s photographic equipment was discreetly spaced about, and on the white walls his commercial photographs: a game-hunting arrow with broad-headed tip hanging down, which he had photographed for an insurance company over the caption of their always hitting the mark; a row of test tubes in a rack, a photo done for Consumers Union analyzing the ingredients of a candy bar. He had also taken and enlarged, for his own enjoyment, several pictures of the Lower East Side, teeming as ever with pedestrians halted or in passage beside pushcarts. I studied them nostalgically, and in one I thought I could make out the word *Mohel* in Hebrew lettering on a sign above the doorway of a tenement.

"There are an awful lot of people born in New York. Were you?" J. asked.

"No, I was born in Austria-Hungary, but some years ago, after the war, I was born again in Poland." They laughed.

"What's the name of the town?" J. asked.

"Too many z's in it to pronounce," I said.

B. recalled crossing over the border into Canada with a party of social-service workers. The rest of the people were born in New York. But she had said proudly: "Portland, Oregon."

"That's when Father was a minister in the logging camps," said J.

"But you weren't born there?" he addressed M.

"Oh, no, I'm a true Brahmin," said M. "Somerville, Boston."

"And you?" I asked J.

"In Suburbia, New Jersey."

OUR levity and small talk seemed to accentuate our nervous anticipation, like tics of uneasiness. What did we want to drink? J. asked. We couldn't decide between vermouth and abstaining, and the question languished there. B. told M. she had done an elegant job in making her dress.

"Does the pattern call for a belt?" she asked.

"No, it was optional," said M. "Would you like it without?"

B. thought she would: "Either that, or a little tighter."

"Yes," said M. And with a whole body's affirmation pulled in the cloth belt a grommet or two more snugly about her narrow waist. Again the question of drinks came up, and we still couldn't decide. J. gave up. I thought M. would benefit by having a vermouth cocktail, and she agreed. With J.'s permission I made her one, and served it, but had none myself. To J.'s nervous garrulity on the propriety of having drinks before the main guests arrived, I said that nothing in my tradition dictated either, only that a *shicker* was a *goy*, and translated that for their benefit; but more to the point, if ever I had an obligation to my shirt collar, this was the evening. I drew out my pipe.

"Oh, yes, that's right," said J., and immediately followed suit. His smoking tobacco looked at first like the brand known as Model, and I lamented my extravagance at splurging 18¢ for my can of Revelation, while his cost only a nickel. But it wasn't Model.

"Let's play rummy," said B. The "Beer Barrel Polka" was set spinning again, J. caviling that the music was too low—tinny—but no one moved to remedy the sound, so on it churned: "Roll out the barrel; we'll have a barrel of fun." Then came the business about the window shades. Sunlight of late afternoon sloped into the room, and B. said she was too warm—and pulled the shades down. But J. objected—and raised them again. "They're better down," M. suggested. "The window panes are simply filthy."

"They still let in some light," said J. "Oh, you lived in a brown house," he chaffed, "with brown insides, and you wore a brown dress."

"M. still shuns light," I joined ungallantly in the banter. (J., the photographer, loved light, and at night wanted all the electric lamps on at once.)

M. pulled the shades down once more, but up they went again, thanks to J. Everyone wandered about, or sat uneasily, as I did, nursing the spruceness of my shirt collar. I had taken my English jacket off when I came into the apartment, as a primary means for keeping cool; but as time approached for the guests to arrive, I fetched it again, and put it on.

"Do you really want to wear your jacket?" asked J.

"No," I said, "but they'll soon be here."

"Don't be silly," B. admonished. "Here give it to me. I'll hang it up." I surrendered the garment.

"The P.'s are human, you know," J. reassured me.

"Well, I'm trying to accept the rules of the game and behave accordingly." And just then the door buzzer strummed.

I REMEMBER a woman, sharp-featured, spare, and quick, she seemed, sharp-eyed, cleaving into the room; attired in a red hat and a blue and white vertically striped shirtwaist, she carried a red handkerchief, and her lips were rouged the same color—carmine. I don't remember the color of her skirt. She greeted her daughters with a kiss, and her voice was light and sweetly cordial, and completely stylized. Followed a man, heavy-shouldered, bulky and big, clad in a gray suit of thin weave. He had a sunburned bald head surrounded by a fringe of gray hair, and a bulbous socratic nose. Compared to him, in almost all respects, features and figure and grace of bearing, his wife epitomized aristocracy. He was deliberate in his movements, as befitted his ponderous physique. I shook hands with the one and with the other. After that, events, though not blurred, became episodic, and I am no longer certain of their proper sequence.

Father sat down in the easy chair before the window in contention, settled himself comfortably and drew out his heavy briar pipe. Mother began talking rapidly and brightly about their lovely boat trip from Boston to New York, and the perfectly glorious weather we were blessed with. B., who had been in Buffalo recently for a social workers' convention, said that the weather there had been positively cold. Had she looked up so-and-so while she was there? Mother asked. No, she hadn't had a chance to. Some talk of Niagara Falls and their beauty on the Canadian side.

"A big piece fell off the American side," J. remarked.

"Oh, yes," we all agreed, with Mother adding: "Wasn't it too bad. The Cave of the Winds is gone."

"Is that so?" I was genuinely surprised. "A friend and I visited it in 1924, after high-school graduation."

"The king and queen of England were there when we were," said Mother.

"We could have come within ten feet of them, if we had wanted to," said Father. The royal pair, he went on, were staying at the Regency, and had he chosen to go to some sort of Kiwanis International reception there, he and Mother could have been near to British sovereignty itself. Mother had declined to go.

"I'm too much of a democrat to think it's worth the trouble," she said. "A democrat with a small d of course."

**J** BROUGHT out pictures he had taken of the monarchs at the World's Fair, which showed them in the same limousine as Governor Lehman and Mayor La Guardia. "The bouncy little man," he explained, "is La Guardia."

There followed talk about conventions, with Father chaffing B. about belonging to a social-workers' organization, a kind of a union, heaven help us. He had a hearty laugh with a deep jolly ratchety timbre about it. They spoke of conventions in general—and the way the Legionnaires behaved. Everything had to be chained down or removed, especially in the hotels they occupied, because anything was apt to be heaved out of the window. They were a wild bunch, but taming down a bit, said Father.

"They're growing older," J. offered the opinion.

"Oh, no," Father differed, masculine and forceful. "The hotels demand a bond before they'll accept the Legionnaires as guests. That's what's taming them down." He went on to recount the difficulty he had had in getting a certain suite of rooms for his offices in one of the better-class hotels in the Midwest. The American Legion had held its convention there the week before, and wrecked the place; and the manager adamantly refused to let him have the suite. "But this is a different kind of organization," Father had tried to

convince the other. "This is the Kiwanis, not the Legion." The manager had listened politely, and a little knowingly, but still refused as adamantly as before. "I'm going to have that suite," said Father (and once again the timbre of his voice summoned up the essence of administrative, of executive, America). "And since you won't give it to me, I'll have to go over your head." He had called up B., a large stockholder in the hotel, and B. had called the manager, advising him he had made a mistake (at which we all duly laughed). "Well, you never saw a man so humble before," said Father. "By the time we were ready to leave, he went out of his way to tell us how very wrong he had been in his estimation of our organization."

Other conventions were discussed, the entire spectrum of conventions: the Retail Liquor Dealers, who went about plastered drunk for three days—said Mother. The Lumbermen's convention, whose members went about sporting canes and wearing a stick in their lapels. The Canners, Mother thought, were the worst.

"The canners?" I said in surprise. "They sound so innocuous."

"Oh, they're anything but," Mother assured me. "They really behave dreadfully." Then the Shriners were brought up for consideration. I have forgotten now whether it was the Shriners or Legionnaires who sprayed acetate on women's legs, which made them feel as if wading through water. J. recalled how on one rainy day, a group of Shriners bought fishing poles and settled on a curbstone and fished.

"How much did you get paid for that?" Mother stood up while J. was still talking, and was inspecting a photograph he had taken for *Field and Stream*: a camping scene, a tent pitched by a stream with a canoe on its bank.

"Must you know?" J. parried.

"Yes. It's very pretty. Now don't be coy, J. It's all in the family."

"For your benefit, G.," he addressed her by her first name, "I was paid fifty dollars."

"That's a tidy sum." And now her quick eye came to rest on the window. "Why, J., what a window!"

"I just didn't have a chance," said J. "The day the window cleaner was here, I forgot to tell him, and when I was he wasn't."

"B.," Mother advised. "You could easily train ivy to go up the window."

B. didn't seem interested. . . .

*[I feel quite depressed as I transcribe from journal to typewriter. What does it come to?—this mounting up, piling up, even in recollection, of allusions to a world of which I shared not the remotest part, cared nothing for, either, though that's beside the point—maybe—could only sit, feigning alterness, and keeping fingers unlocked in my lap because they stuck together. I try to recall, but it is beyond*

*recall, whether I sought M.'s eyes or not, M.'s smile of encouragement or sympathy. In later days publicists and sociologists would speak of a generation gap. There was no such term then; it was taken for granted that American parents, in general, those of the middle class (not my own immigrant ones, of course), expressed attitudes no longer in vogue—nothing wrong with them, only at variance, because taken up with traditional concerns, positive concerns, American business, American drive, the overcoming of obstacles, forging ahead of competition: success. There it was again. And perhaps it was that, in this unfamiliar setting, without realizing it then—but only now—that tenuous sorrow, scarcely at sentient level, that I felt in the sacrifice of my own estranged kin, I also felt here. Without knowing it, just feeling it: the no-longer creative sacrifice of personality for no-longer affirmative, no-longer stirring aspirations. Other men and women, better equipped intellectually and by training, have said all this long before, and with a trenchancy far beyond me*

*Different, though, were the ways of analysis and the ways of feeling. M.'s father, the idealistic clergyman with a mission to Far Western logging camps, a mission of salvation, become the executive secretary; a kind of spiritual gloss mitigating the crassness of conservative American businessmen. If I could only have formulated his role then, as M. did, as M. perceived it, and as I have now barely learned to do, I think I could somehow have buffered the nameless, blind wave of hopelessness and of isolation I felt. On top of everything else that I was, and detested being, I had to enact this that I wasn't. Only that tall girl dressed in her homespun hopsacking suit, who sat across the room, was my nexus here. She was my future: I had no other: she was my need. But what was I on the scale of her need? Home Relief pauper, dubious scrivener, Jewish neurotic.]*

July 1939, Friday night

I TOOK M. home Friday evening for the Sabbath supper. She had gotten over her apprehension about going to my parents' home; and on my part, it was a deliberate decision to go there Friday evening, when Pop was sure to be home, and we could, as it were, keep the reconciliation thriving.

It was dusk when we got off the Brooklyn train. We passed the hovels where the Negroes lived. Perhaps it was just such unmitigated squalor, I thought, about which I had tried to make a superficial story that now lay in my bureau drawer, exacting such retribution. It could be made to seem so, though it probably had nothing to do with the case, an afterthought. I slipped M.'s hand through the crook of my arm. Around the corner, in houses adjoining Mom's, lived the Gypsies; we saw flounce of gaudy skirt, drab men sitting on the porches. Mom said, always observing life with such

utter absence of self that her very recounting was fraught with the sublimity of primitive generalization, how enviable: the young Gypsy woman who had lost her husband screamed her grief incessantly hour after hour, unconsolably—until the day he was buried. And then, said Mom, it was as though the young widow had wiped the slate clean. You would never have known that yesterday she was howling in bereavement. Wiped away and over.

Mom welcomed us—at the door. Pop as usual lurked in embarrassment in the front room, until he had mustered up the necessary social self-possession to come out and say hello. We had brought back several empty jars—to replenish Mom's supply—jars that had been full of homemade jelly she had given us when we were last there.

The table was covered with a white tablecloth embroidered with white figures, and set with new silverware—and with all the professional skill of Pop's calling as a waiter. As we stood talking, Mom's ancient poodle decrepitly crept in—newly shorn of its scraggly curls—and I quipped that it looked like a clam without its shell. "That's my friend," said Mom staunchly, and laughed. For once she refrained from adding, "That's my best friend," to Pop's annoyance.

There was, as always when my father entertained guests, guests whom he had been expecting, and in expectation accumulated a degree of tension, that nervous abrupt air about everything he said and did. It was at such times, when he was close to being overwrought—and most apt to fly off the handle at a trifle—that Mom seemed to insist on doing things her own way, with an obduracy nothing short of deliberate provocation. It was an ancient, grievous story. First, contrary to his expressed wish, she broke off irregular chunks of the braided *challah*, instead of cutting neat slices, as he urged. With company present, Pop always concealed his anxiety (I suspect anxiety over his volatility, fear of the imminence of his uncontrollable eruption) by adopting a super-mild tone of voice. It purred with humility and inoffensiveness. The poor man evidently thought, if he thought about it at all, that his unctuousness created an image of himself that he would give anything to be: the calm, polite, and self-possessed individual. Instead, his show of cordiality had an air of unreality about it; one sensed another person behind the febleness of the wheedling, good-humored front. Especially was this true to anyone who knew him, knew how fantastically at variance this deportment was with his customary behavior—which showed itself when Mom insisted on tearing off hunks of *challah* (more picturesque actually than sliced, I think, and more tempting in its homey honesty). His voice shifted momentarily to the harsh, rancorous sound I had known so many years. He glared at her, the meek, benign, countenance becoming leathery with hate and exasperation.