

## BOYS

He was working with his sister at the time. So it was just the two of them. And he stopped to pick her up on the way down, which was how he described the trip. “I’m heading down,” he would say to her, when he called before leaving the house. “Are you ready?”

All he meant by “down,” or all he thought he meant, was that the route to the business took him more toward downtown than not. He drove his silvery-blue Dodge Dart, a new model, 1966, through the streets of his neighborhood, over to hers, the autumn elms and oaks and sugar maples arching over the streets, stopping in front of her house, her waiting on the porch when the weather was fine, as it was that day. A perfect golden day for Halloween—something you couldn’t rely on in the Midwest.

They said their hellos, Harry and Ilo, not much new since yesterday. He’d come to feel that this was his life, and this was how it would be, from today until tomorrow and on and on. Not a bad life. With his wife. His daughters. Your basic comforts. Summer vacations at the Michigan lakes, the great and the small. Then he and Ilo were nearing the end of their well-worn route *down*, making the turn onto Grand River, crossing Joy Road.

It was Detroit, and by 1966, Grand River south of Joy was all concrete and brick, with barely a tree or shrub, barely a patch of grass.

Joy Road—now there was a misnomer. That stretch had broken windows and traffic snarls, and grown men with nothing to do during the day. Up and down these broad streets, buses belched clouds of black smoke as they roared past the metal-grated building faces. And as if inviting trouble, Levine’s was the only business along the stretch that lacked one of those grates.

Whenever Harry talked about the place, his sisters-in-law and cousins, with their stiff beauty-parlor bouffants and manicures, held

their faces and said *schwarze* this and *schwarze* that. Same for the big-bellied brothers-in-law with their ruby pinkie rings and slicked-back hair.

On Grand River, the un-grated Levine Wholesale Shoes stood beside the tiny White Castle hamburger building with its crude crenelated top. Across the street and down a few blocks was the magnificent, decaying Riviera Theatre, or “the Iviera,” as his sister called it. The *R* in the towering vertical marquee had become a jagged hole; farther down, the upper bar of the *E* appeared gangrenous, and the final *R* and *A* were also festering.

In the alley behind the business, two small boys scuffed along, kicking the alley stones as they went on their way to school. Ilo checked the door locks. The boys switched to single file, so Harry’s car could pass.

“No costumes,” Harry said.

“Halloween’s for people who’ve got something to give away,” Ilo said. She shifted her purse from lap to floor.

Harry pulled into the parking space under the wooden fire escape that led to the upstairs apartment. Curtis, Harry’s tenant, stood on the landing.

Harry waved to him as he got out of the car. It was a warm day, with a Technicolor blue sky, promising a smooth road, straight through to evening; a gift for the children, who could run through the leaves without blustery-cold wind or driving rain, without arguments about sweaters that would bulk out costumes, or stupid coats that would obscure them entirely.

“Morning, Mr. Levine,” Curtis said. “Any work today?”

It was a gift, too, in a way, to have Curtis upstairs, available whenever Harry needed him. But also, in a way, a burden of responsibility whenever he didn’t. “We’ll see what we’ve got,” Harry said.

Harry tended to the keys, the unlocking, and Ilo followed him into the whole familiar cloud of smells, old and new, musty and fusty: wood and brick and rubber, leather and canvas, cardboard and jute. The two did their morning chores: turning off the burglar alarm, closing the metal bars behind them, snapping the padlock, then closing the big wooden door, fastening the two dead bolts, straightening the rows of shoe boxes in the aisles of gray metal shelving that reached practically to the ceiling, and checking the thermostat near the bathroom door. Harry asking Ilo what she thought about having Sappho, his family’s Doberman, for the evening so the barking wouldn’t chase the trick-or-

treaters away, Ilo saying “Oh, all right. Two old maids spending the night together.” Harry saying thanks. Coming along, coming up the hall, doing this little job and that, arriving in the front.

The front of the building was composed of two rooms. In one, a simple window display: three pairs of old-fashioned lace-up boots in black and brown, mini-torture chambers, with their needle-point toes so narrow through the foot and up the ankle that they suggested severe structural damage. Harry’s father—that was Joe—who had started the business, had found them in the cave-like basement of the building they’d owned on West Jefferson. He brought them along when they moved to this new address, left them behind when he moved to Florida and then died shortly after, willing the building and everything in it to Harry. Not that Harry had ever wanted it. Not that Harry was any kind of expert on what he wanted, mostly afraid to want anything.

Ilo had placed those old shoes in the window, on a wooden table below the dark-green arcing letters that said “J. Levine Wholesale Shoes.” She dusted them once a week and polished them once a year, with brushes and buffing cloths, and fussed with the arrangement, adding seasonal accessories, as if she were a window decorator at J. L. Hudson’s, Detroit’s big downtown department store. Harry said nothing about her display, as he said nothing about much of what she did, in their long history of brother-sister silence. But he did like having the shoes there, as they seemed to elevate their business, along with the concept of shoe, into the sweep of history, one chapter in the world’s march toward human comfort, toward understanding the health function of a foot in a shoe.

Because of the chores, the routine, on the way up the hall to the two front rooms, Harry didn’t see, or notice, the front window until the Halloween-morning sun glinted off it full on. And because he’d never seen anything like this before on his own front window, but because he had seen pictures, and because a deep ancestral memory of facing something like this was stored in a brain region that science had not yet identified, he now had a conjunction of shock and recognition, a sense that he’d always expected it, but that it didn’t hurt any less for the expecting.

And because Ilo always came up behind him, as if to say, let him be the first to face whatever happened during the night, let him be the

scout, and because she had stopped in the ancient bathroom, where the door didn't close all the way because of the warping and the layer upon ageless layer of paint, to check her lipstick—lipstick of all things, in a place like this. And because she was about to see the same front window he'd seen, he moved quickly in front of it and fooled with the old-fashioned shoes, thinking he might cover what he'd seen or simply distract her so she wouldn't see, or distract himself so that he wouldn't see, wouldn't fully see. Of course, the letters were backwards, when viewed from the inside, but it was surprising how many of them worked either way.

Ilo said it out loud. It was written in soap in big block letters—the *honky* and the *Jew* in horizontal bands, one above the other, and the *boy* below in a vertical that dead ended at the store's name. Dead ended because the writer or soaper had used the Levine *v* to make the boy *y*, crudely artful, like on a Scrabble board—triple word score. *Honky Jew boy*.

And, too, it looked as though the *o* of the *boy* could drop into the open arms of the *v*, now a funnel *y*, and then lodge there in the throat if the passage was too narrow, or if not, perhaps slip right through and become impaled, skewered, on the second *l* in *Wholesale*, like a Greek letter or a marshmallow on a stick.

If you were Harry, you could Scrabble it any which way, turn it into a game, like they did with the children on long car trips—playing I spy, or telling the girls to find all the letters of the alphabet on the signs they passed, and the first one who found them all was the winner. “Do license plates count?” Joanna, the middle daughter, always asked, as if there were an official set of rules for these made-up distractor games.

“Honky Jew boy?” Ilo said again, in that reading-group-2 way, where each word is a separate entity rather than a meaningful link in a chain.

Harry remembered what Ruth, his wife, said: that the word *Jew*, by itself, could sound ugly, spit out. It was better when softened with the *ish* ending, as in short-ish or small-ish, suggesting not exactly short or small but somewhat.

“At least it wasn't a brick,” he said.

They stood near the window. He thought about how they might go on with the day, how they might move on to business, like any other day. His instinct was to minimize, something he'd learned to do in a house full of females, a wife and three daughters, whose emotional responses to him more often than not seemed overwrought, unnecessary. He had

learned to balance, to offset, as on a teeter totter, with Ruth and the girls massed at one far end, and him, maintaining the weight and the force to keep them in balance.

“If you’d put up a grate like all the other business owners, like I’ve been telling you,” Ilo said. She was always scolding, always telling, always what she’d said before, who hadn’t listened, who hadn’t understood what she so long ago had grasped, told, instructed.

“Some kid on Devil’s night. Don’t make a big deal.” Devil’s night, what they called it in Detroit—the mischief-making before Halloween, when kids soaped windows, toilet-papered trees and bushes, slathered shaving cream on sidewalks, rung doorbells, and smashed eggs. Those were innocent days.

“Oh yeah,” Ilo said. “Trick or treat.” Her hands in fists, on hips, her head shaking.

“I’ll get Curtis to clean it,” Harry said. He went to his desk.

His desk was in the other front room, set off by a wood-and-glass partition. In it were the two desks, an adding machine and phone on each, a black Underwood on Ilo’s, the big old safe that Joe bought when he first started in business and that he lugged with him from West Jefferson to Grand River, along with the old-fashioned shoes. Both Harry and Ilo knew the combination, and every night, they opened it to store their petty cash, their checkbooks, their bookkeeping ledgers. And every morning, they reopened it to take out what they needed for the daily business.

Harry opened the safe, his fingers on the cool metal dial, his focus on the whirs and clicks of a reliable old lock. He shuffled through the pink order forms, the ones he needed to fill and deliver today. Keeping busy. That was his way.

“You could get his son to clean it, seeing he’s probably the one who did it.” She meant Alvin, Curtis’s son, with the heavy-lidded slit-eyes and unsmiling lips that said he’d already seen enough to know how much was wrong with the way things worked. Alvin, with his head so finely sculpted it might belong to a mannequin, his flat smudged eyebrows, as if thumbed on with finger paint. Alvin, with the beautiful voice that could go to falsetto. Harry heard him singing all around the building—upstairs through the floorboards, out in back when the windows were open.

He ran his knuckle over his mustache. He had a high forehead, and

significant, dark eyebrows, a roof over each dark eye, black wavy hair that made you think of Xavier Cugat, south of the border. “There’s no way to know it was Alvin.”

“No,” she said. She fiddled with her window display—small gourds in oranges and greens, striped and mottled, with odd ridges and nose-like protrusions, each distinctive, lying on a bed of brown oak leaves she’d collected from her yard, with *Honky Jew Boy* as their backdrop. “Could be one of his friends.” She joined Harry in the office.

“You think someone would do that to the place they live?” He shuffled through the papers on his desk. “Now tell me why someone would do that to their home.”

She made the sound in the throat, a sarcastic cough, that declares the question ridiculous, undeserving of an answer. She sat at her desk. “What are you? Anne Frank?”

Foot traffic picked up on the sidewalk. Buses pulled up at the stop near Levine’s front door, letting people on, off. People changed places, all around the city, a big game of musical chairs. People passing on the bus looked at Harry’s window, people getting off the bus saw it, too, carrying the questions and private thoughts away with them, into their own days, perhaps telling the story to someone else, what they’d seen, what it meant.

“Soaped windows, okay, they’re an annoyance,” Ilo said. “But they’re in the range.” She went back to the window. “*This*,” she said, “is not in the range.” People at the bus stop, whose gazes were usually fixed down the street, as if the act of watching summoned the bus, stole glances at the defaced window. They emerged from the customary isolation to talk among themselves. Heads shaking, shoulders shrugging, embarrassed by what the words said, unsure how to respond, whether to be caught looking.

“If you won’t do something,” Ilo said, “I will. You have to show them.”

“Show them what?” Harry asked. “Show who?”

“That you’re not afraid.”

“Who said I’m afraid?” Everywhere he went, from home to work to home, it was women, telling him what he felt, what he was, what he wasn’t, what kind of mistakes he was making. “I told you I’ll take care of it.”

“What do you mean ‘take care of it’?” It was a good question. Pre-serve? Coddle?

“Clean it off,” he said. They spoke to each other this way—clipped, devoid of commiseration, not wanting to feel. He pushed his chair back from the desk.

“You don’t want to know who did it?” she asked.

“And once we know?”

“When we call the police, that’s for them to decide.”

He was on his way to the storage closet. His back was turned to her. “We’re not calling the police.”

“Oh, you.” The gesture she threw after him, a silent, empty overhand pitch, was one of their mother’s, imprinted early, meaning that an argument may have been lost but it wasn’t over, that once again being overruled, censored, made powerless, left her wanting to fling something at the censor. “The cleaning stuff is in the storage closet,” she called after him. “Or down in the basement.” Curtis had used it last, when he washed the window the other day. She’d seen him working, making sure to catch every drip, checking for smudges both inside and out. She got up, as if she would follow Harry, to make sure he heard her, but the phone rang, a loud ring, echoing through the building.

“Hallo,” she said, the accent on the first syllable, impatient, as if it were her hundredth of the morning. She pulled the order pad from the shelf, lifted a pencil from the gas-station jelly jar, settled into her chair and checked off boxes, filling numbers into columns. “Uh huh,” she said. “Yup. Nope. Anything else?”

Oh, how she wanted to tell the customer what had happened, the window, the words, Harry’s response versus hers, to tell on him, his dismissal of a weighty matter. But something stopped her. Loyalty. Obedience. Work ethic. “Twelve women’s eights?” she said. “Navy or white?”

“Ilo,” Harry yelled. He was in the storage closet. “Where’s the bucket?” She didn’t answer. He rifled, and finding nothing he wanted, backed out. And so, to the basement. There, Harry stored the extra shoe inventory. It was Curtis, mainly, who carried the shoe boxes down when a shipment came, sorting them by size, and arranging them on the shelves. The staircase was narrow, the steps uneven and worn, so balancing the stacks of eight or ten shoe boxes at a time, while watching one’s footwork, was difficult, sweaty, and repetitive. Bringing them up again to restock the upstairs shelves was no picnic either. Still, Curtis did it without complaint, though Harry often apologized for it.

At the bottom of the stairs were two big inventory rooms, one on ei-

ther side of the long hallway, and they were filled with long rows of high metal shelving, like the ones upstairs, and stacked with tan and white boxes, patiently waiting to be called to duty. Beyond those rooms was the furnace room, with the huge old boiler, its pipes reaching up and out through the basement ceiling.

Beyond the boiler were the rooms where he stored business records—some going back to the forties—and other mysterious detritus from the building on Jefferson that they had brought along but never looked at again. In those rooms, also, they stored the contents of Ruth's parents' house—moved here after both had died. Storage: the solution to the problem of not being able to part with something, but not being able to use it either. Upstairs, he could hear Ilo, the rollers of her chair on the wooden floor; the phone, her heels clicking as she moved from the desk to the file cabinet and back.

He pulled the light chains as he went deeper in, to one of the rooms behind the furnace, where Curtis perhaps had left the ladder and the buckets. As he moved from pull chain to pull chain, he felt like a chimpanzee, brachiating, as his Lena, the daughter studying anthropology, called it, and swatting away the cobwebs.

Light from bare bulbs revealed cartons stacked in corners, labeled with magic marker: Pesach dishes, linens, records 1950–1960, photos. And in the pile, a small dust-covered box, small enough for a bird you might find in the backyard. Harry's prototype. The baby shoes he had designed all those years ago.

And, beside it, cobwebby, was an item of high dispute among Ruth and her siblings: the pieces of Ruth's father's *sukkah*—the little house he constructed in the backyard every spring, where they ate their meals during the full-moon festival of Sukkos. None of the siblings put up a *sukkah* in their own yard, and as Harry had predicted, none ever would. So down it went, to the basement of J. Levine Wholesale Shoes—the bottomless repository of lost traditions and small, painful reminders.

He wound through the small windowless rooms, past the business and family history, and when he brachiated into the next room, pulling the chain on the next light bulb, he wasn't sure what he was seeing. He had to blink once, twice, like they did in cartoons. The room had been made into something, someone's notion of a clubhouse, or a living room. Carpet samples, a mix of colors and textures, were pieced together to cover the floor. Mismatched chairs were arranged in a ragged

circle. Two were of the narrow wooden folding variety one saw in shul basements. In fact, they probably were from a shul—Ruth’s father’s old chairs, that he had carried back and forth to the shul when the congregation needed extras, and that had ended up in Harry’s basement when no one knew what else to do with them.

Also in the circle was a fifties-style stuffed armchair with no legs, a dingy plaid couch with worn arms that had an old brocade curtain thrown over it. The circle included three metal lawn chairs with broad shell-shaped backs. Ruth’s parents’ coffee table, covered with books and papers in neat piles. An end table, and a carved onyx lamp with a torn lampshade, also from Ruth’s parents’ house. Ashtrays, overflowing. Marijuana cigarettes, whole ones and parts, lay in and around the ashtrays. Harry recognized them from the pictures in *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Above, again, Ilo’s movements, her spike heels drumming against the wooden floor on her way to the bathroom. He followed her footsteps through the building to the basement stairs, tap-tapping.

“Harry,” she called. “What are you doing?”

What he didn’t want was for her to come down. Because down here, there were even more discoveries: A small red record player, set into a leatherette box with a handle, like a suitcase. Albums. On the top one, five Negro men, made to look as friendly and safe as possible, all dressed alike, in bright blue suit jackets with skinny velveteen lapels, velveteen bowties, and black pocket handkerchiefs to match the lapels and bowties. Their shirts had French cuffs and gold cufflinks, and they all had amazing sculpted hair. The Temptations.

“I’ll be up in a minute,” he called. He heard her hesitate, then the spike-heel tapping, back to her desk and her work, the bookkeeping, the columns of numbers entered in the little boxes on the ledger sheets. On the wall above her desk was the index card with the emergency phone numbers—police, fire department. It had been her idea, to hang one there, and one on the wall next to Harry’s desk too.

On the basement floor, beside the couch, was a powder-blue phone—one of those new princess phones, the kind Joanna had begged for. As if talking into a phone like this one with its sleek lines would somehow make life different or better—more princess-like. The peculiar thing about this phone was that Curtis and Alvin didn’t have phone service.

So what was this princess phone doing here? He bent, picked it up,

heard the dial tone, the sign of life and connection, and put it down. “How the heck . . . ?” He followed the tangle of multicolored wires, reaching out to touch here and there, as if to assure himself they were real. At the end, on the far side of the room, the main wire hooked in with Harry’s own phone box in a jumble that despite its wild appearance had generated a dial tone.

He returned to the coffee table, covered with books and papers. He sat. He perused. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Harry, of course, knew the man’s history, a self-educated man, a former thug, who’d become a leader, lived in Detroit at one time, then was assassinated, just last year. He’d seen the pictures in the paper, the stern eyes, the close-cropped hair, the black-topped glasses, always dressed in a suit and tie (but not the cheerful blue kind of the Temptations). Always the pointing finger, saying whatever he liked—that Kennedy’s assassination was the chickens coming home to roost, that revolution was what the Negro needed, that revolution was always violent, and that locking arms and singing “We Shall Overcome” was no kind of revolution. Harry wouldn’t go so far as to say, or even to think, he was glad Malcolm X had been assassinated, but the man had scared him.

On the coffee table that used to belong to his in-laws, where in the old days in their living room he’d find a bowl of walnuts and almonds with the old brass nutcracker, copies of the *Detroit Jewish News*, and a framed photo of some relative lost in the old country, he now found a clipping from the *South End*, Wayne State University’s newspaper. The headline was “White Privilege and the Horatio Alger Myth,” by John Watson. Lena was a student at Wayne State, and she often quoted the *South End*, as the paper had grown more radical, a good thing in her estimation. “It is nonsense,” Watson had written and someone had underlined, “to say that anyone could pull himself up with hard work. Whites come into the world with a full array of resources and privileges—many of them flowing from the washed-out color of their skin, their built-in bootstraps.”

“Harry.” It was her again. Partway down the stairs now. “Don’t leave me to handle this myself.”

He tossed the *South End* on the couch and wound his way through the rooms to the staircase. He could see her on the third step from the top, first only the shoes, pumps, nice ones, then as he got closer, the thick ankles, the legs, the hem of the skirt, then all of her, bending over,

holding onto the banister and looking sour. "I'll be right up," he said. "I'm looking." He was certainly doing that.

"I don't like being up here by myself," she said.

"You've been up there plenty of times by yourself."

"You know what I mean."

"Okay. I'm getting the stuff. I'll be right there." And he stood, watching until she backed up the stairs, and until he heard her returning to her desk.

Back in the room—Alvin's lounge was how he already thought of it—on the coffee table was a narrow pamphlet with big hand-lettered words. "Black Panther Party Platform: What We Want; What We Believe." *What we want*, Harry thought. He unfolded it. He rarely let himself want anything. Yet here was a whole numbered list.

1. *We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.* We believe that black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.
2. *We want full employment for our people.* We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every man employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the white American businessmen will not give full employment, then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.

He folded the pamphlet and put it in his pocket. This was something he'd have to read later. He picked up another clipping. This one by Stokely Carmichael, another angry Negro, or black, as some of them now wanted to be called. Carmichael had been in Detroit recently, speaking downtown, at Cobo Hall. A sentence underlined in blue ink: *It was for example the exploitation of Jewish landlords and merchants which first created black resentment toward Jews.* This was Alvin's place, and these were his things, and this was what he read.

Stan, one of the other Grand River business owners, referred to Carmichael as that colored terror-monger. "You know what he said to his people that day at Cobo?" Stan reported to Harry. "'Don't let them

send you off to Vietnam to fight and kill. Stay here and do it.” Stan loved to quote that line, his face flaming up. “Stay here and do it,” Stan said. “What grown man talks like that?” Stan and four other men were trying to form a Grand River business association to demand more police patrols along their stretch, and more police attention to the young people—a number of whom lived in apartments upstairs from their stores.

*Stay here and do it.* Harry didn’t approve of those words, but an alliance with the other businessmen was not “his thing,” an expression his daughters used—for example, when they said it was not “their thing” to help him clean up after Sappho in the yard. When one of these men called or stopped by, Harry always said he was too busy. He preferred to work, not kvetch about hard times, about potential dangers. He was sure they talked to Ilo when he was out, and she probably loved it. Some people loved to be scared.

“Harry,” Ilo called again. He hadn’t even noticed that the tap, tap, tap of her heels above him had returned. “What is going on down there?” Good question, he thought.

He walked through the maze of rooms, carrying the Carmichael piece with him. “I said I’ll be there in a minute.”

“It’s already been a minute,” she said.

“Let me be, Ilo. I’m almost done.” He didn’t hear it, but he could picture it—the arm fling, the huff of annoyance.

Harry returned to the lounge. Curtis and Alvin had access to the basement through the front of the building. It wasn’t that. Not that he’d broken and entered. Nothing like that.

He picked up all the marijuana cigarettes from the ashtrays—the wholes and the halves and the quarters and the tiny ends, which left smudges on his fingers when they crumbled. He folded the Carmichael article, to make it into a small packet for the marijuana cigarettes, and he put the whole thing in his pocket beside the Black Panther wants and beliefs.

He left the room, pulling the light chains as he went, passing through the furnace room. He went into one of his inventory rooms, and walked up and down every aisle, looking at the stacks of boxes, all the sizes—men’s work boots, police oxfords, baby shoes. He walked across the hall to the other inventory room, and there he did the same, walking up and down every aisle, looking up, at the boxes stacked almost to the ceiling, and down, the lowest shelf inches off the floor. He

walked out into the hall, and just about to climb the stairs, he saw the stepladder, leaned against the wall, and on the wooden shelves beside the steps, the buckets and sponges and squeegee and scraping tool, rags and paper towels—all arranged carefully where Curtis had left them. He looked at his watch. He'd only been down here fifteen, twenty minutes. What was she complaining about?

He gathered what he needed, hung the stepladder over his shoulder, and climbed the stairs, ladder digging into his shoulder, pail knocking against his leg and then against the brick wall, keeping time like a metronome.

When he came rattling and banging into the front office, two policemen stood with Ilo on the sidewalk, one on either side of her, looking at the window, their car parked behind them, at the bus stop. One officer had a notepad, and he wrote, as Ilo looked over his shoulder, pointed to the page, likely instructing on her name, in the way she always did: Ilo, which rhymes with high-low, and Levine, which rhymes with the queen. As if the police cared about getting her name right.

Harry put down his bucket, removed the ladder from his shoulder, and leaned it against the wall, moving slowly, showing the police that not every Levine was so excitable. Halfway to the door, the phone rang, and he decided to get it, stall for time, for thoughts. He tried to imagine the headline in tonight's paper, some clever word trick that wove in the themes of anti-Semitic slurs, Halloween devilry, and the shady slumlord with the den of iniquity in his basement and the stash in his pocket.

On the phone, it was Al from Keene Shoes, and the mindless exchange began, the preliminaries, the how's business, how's the family, Harry looking at the neat papers on Ilo's desk, an order ready to be filled, for Jarousek's on the east side.

"Al," Harry said. "I'll get my sister to take your order. Just a minute." A minute here, a minute there; soon it would add up to a whole day.

Out on the sidewalk, weighing in with Ilo and the police were Bernie Segal from Formica City, the furniture store across the street, and Stan Fink, from Fink Hardware, two buildings down, who so loved to quote Stokely Carmichael. *Stay here and do it.*

"You, of all people?" Bernie said when Harry came out. "To get this treatment?" Ilo reluctantly went in to get the phone when Harry asked her.

Bernie. He was Jewish skinny—meaning he'd learned early how to break a woman's heart, starting with his mother, as she sat long into the night, pleading for him to take one more bite. Bernie wore a big thick mustache, well groomed, a handsome specimen, like a thatched roof compared with Harry's thin dark fringe. "We go back," Bernie said to the police. He did a back-and-forth gesture between himself and Harry.

It was true. They did go back, back to the old neighborhood—Linwood near Dexter and Davison—where Bernie had been a regular at Ruth's house, a friend of her younger brother Irv.

"Yeah," Harry said. "We go back." Which didn't mean Harry loved him, or even liked him. He hated the man's crude language and humor, the sex jokes. Someday, when Bernie was old and frail, or when he predeceased Harry and could no longer flirt with Ruth, the history would likely hit Harry in one big wet eye rush, but not right now, not with the actual physical person to contend with.

"What are we going to do about this, fellows?" Bernie asked the police, as if he'd been called in on special assignment.

Two ladies waited at the bus stop, and a third joined them. Harry nodded to the thin woman with the shopping bag, Mrs. Johnston, who had been his tenant before Curtis and Alvin. She nodded back, with the short, businesslike nod of a person whose main objective is to carry on unimpeded with her daily routine, but who recognizes that this congregation on the sidewalk could potentially derail it, and thus is struggling with conflicting feelings of concern, fear, and simple curiosity.

"It's not like we haven't asked for extra help," Stan told the police. His voice suggested a heavy, consistent infusion of cigarette smoke. "Oral," Ruth called him. A nail biter. "Licking his wounds," Ruth said of him, as she said of all nail biters. "What is this?" he asked, addressing the police officers. "Munich? We're supposed to put up with this?"

"Look," Harry said. "Why don't you let me talk to the officers?"

The bus pulled up behind the police car and rescued Mrs. Johnston and the other women. Harry could see them watching as the bus took them off, to their lives in other parts of the city, while he remained, sadly, behind, feeling as if he'd been up all night digging a trench or fighting a fire, something he had fortunately never had to do.

"Mr. Levine," the bigger officer said. His name was Pawlikowski, and he was the kind of big that was marginally contained within his clothes—the buttons, the belt, the laces on the shoes, all doing hero's work. He

had a pasty complexion, pitted with acne remnants or chicken pox. Officer Pawlikowski stifled a burp, as big men sometimes do.

By comparison, his partner, named Dunn, was small, with eyes that pointed in two directions at once, making Harry wonder where he was looking, what he was seeing: Harry's face, the words on the front window, or something beyond what others could see? Harry slid his hands into his pockets, and for a moment he was surprised to find something beyond change and a handkerchief. He almost pulled the something out to see what it was.

Traffic slowed and clogged at the sight of the human drama whose meaning passersby could only guess—the police, the white men, the writing on the store window. *Gapers' block* they called it years later—the delay caused by people straining to know.

"Your sister's pretty upset about this," Pawlikowski said. "She flagged us down. Ran into traffic waving her arms . . . You would have thought it was a . . . You know."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I know." Harry understood that the order, or veneer of order, that prevailed around here depended, in part, on the police presence, the gun holster at the hip, the roaming squad car. But in a city like Detroit, created in large part by the vision of that rotten Henry Ford, anti-Semitism was practically official policy. Whatever Harry might be a victim of would likely be seen as something he had coming to him.

Harry read it this way: The police were inviting him to view the situation man to man, to join together in giving the hysterical woman the brush-off. Together, they could concoct a scenario that would be quickly concluded: a joke between men on the street. A beautiful fall day. Halloween mischief. An ugly sign on the window, to be sure. But one that could be washed off. It was only soap. Itself a cleansing product.

"She says she wants us to talk to the tenant," Officer P. said.

"You know women," Harry replied. He motioned in a general way toward the place where she sat at her desk. They could see her in there, phone to ear.

Bernie and Stan stood a few feet off, smoking. Bernie scratched at the soapy *w* on the window with the cover of his matchbook.

"You disagree, then? About talking to the tenant?" Officer Pawlikowski looked like a man whose feet were tired, even this early in the morning, still swollen from the day before, throbbing inside his police oxfords, which Harry noted as Bates, Goodyear welt construction. He

looked like he'd probably snuck a kielbasa for breakfast—against doctor's orders—and it was getting back at him now.

"She mentioned he has a kid," said Dunn. "A teenager." Of the two officers, he was the friskier, possibly the more dangerous. Harry looked at him. A pipsqueak with the confusing eyes, not all that much past teenager himself. This string of words they were using with each other, "women," "tenant," "teenager," was getting to Harry—as if one word was all you needed to know, as if it telegraphed everything, funneled whole populations down to a label, like the label on the window, like the *y* in *boy* with its narrow throat in which a whole huge history of meanings and individual variations could disappear. Women: foolish. Tenants: losers. Teenagers: delinquents.

"He's a youngster," Harry said. "That's all. A good kid." He kept his hands in his pockets. He was anxious for the police to leave, anxious for this incident to fade into a little nothing. Let the police completely forget it after they left. Maybe tell it as an amusing story to their wives when they got home, between the visits of the trick-or-treat kids. Or after the Dunn and Pawlikowski kids were in bed, as the parents rifled through the treats the kids left on the living room floor. This business could become an anecdote. A "those people" kind of story, where the "those people" could refer to Harry, to Alvin and his friends, to Curtis, to the whole neighborhood. It could be anyone but them. "Look," Harry said, "you can understand why my sister's upset. Just think, if it was your building. Your people. Polish, Irish. You know what it's like. Your people have been through it."

Bernie and Stan exchanged looks, checked watches, cleared throats, tossed cigarettes, toed them into the sidewalk. "Harry," Bernie said. "What are you, crazy?"

The police ignored the comment. "You're saying you've never had trouble with the boy?" Pawlikowski asked.

"Never," Harry said. "Alvin keeps to himself. He works for me sometimes. His father's a good man, too. He keeps a close eye."

Cars slowed and honked as they passed. A VW bus painted in day-glo colors slowed. It had the three-leafed marijuana symbol decaled on its side, and a man with bushy dark hair and a beard stuck his head and shoulders out the window. "Pigs," he screamed. The police barely looked.

"Harry," Bernie said. "You're going to let him get away with this?"

He rattled the coins in his pocket. Restless. Ready to get back to work if this scene was going nowhere.

Harry found the coin-rattling crude—advertising what you’ve got, weighing it. “Get away with what?”

As if beckoned by the fates, three teenaged boys rounded the corner, Alvin among them. The three friends were together often, out on the sidewalk in front of the building, or sitting on the wooden fire escape in the back, long legs hanging over railings, singing harmonies.

Bernie and Stan would stay for this. They’d complained to Harry about how these boys gathered with others, on the sidewalks, in front of stores, got rowdy, making it hard for people to pass. The business owners said it discouraged foot traffic, customers. But this was not a concern for Harry, tucked away behind his locked doors; a wholesaler didn’t care about foot traffic.

Harry had met these friends, Wendell and Otis, Alvin’s sidekicks, his back-up singers, who lived in the two-family flats on the nearby side streets. None of them looked to Harry like the Black Power types, with their numbered wants and beliefs, who wore their leather jackets and berets, dressed to kill. These three looked more like the Motown types, velveteen-lapelled and ready to croon their way into the stage lights.

These boys had hair pressed into small, tight waves, a conservative style in an era when hair broadcast far more radical messages. And they were dressed smartly: high-waisted pants, one pair in maroon, one in teal, one in black, all with a rayon sheen. Wendell, with the lightest skin of the three, wore a thin tie with a crisp white high-collared shirt; the other two wore sweaters.

As the boys came up the street, their arms swung, smooth and loose, a book, a notebook, resting in cupped hands. But they slowed, lowered their eyes, straightened their shoulders, as they approached Harry’s group, conversation caught in mid-sentence.

“Alvin,” Harry said by way of good morning. Alvin looked up briefly when Harry spoke to him. In his pocket, Harry touched the paper packet. Bernie, too, had his hands in his pockets, jingling his coins, his own stash.

“Alvin Evans?” Officer Pawlikowski said.

“Yes, sir,” Alvin said. Still looking down, the looseness gone.

“Where you and your friends headed, Alvin?” the big officer asked.

“School,” Alvin said. But he said it quietly, and the word might have been lost in the sounds of the cars passing. It might have bounced off the brick buildings, the pavement, and been muffled by the roar of the bus stopped behind the police car, as its driver prepared to pull out into traffic.

Alvin kept his eyes down, on his black, polished pointed-toe shoes, which, Harry noted, were not the ones he had given Alvin in September, offering them as back-to-school shoes, giving them to Curtis one day while they worked, a quick handover, trying to minimize embarrassment, saying, “Take these for Alvin. He could probably use a new pair.”

Over the three or four years that Curtis and Alvin had lived upstairs, Harry had given them shoes each season—tennis shoes in spring and summer, work boots in winter, black leather oxfords with rubber soles in fall. Joanna said that only a spaz wore that style. Harry had never seen Alvin wear any of the shoes he had given.

The officer wanted Alvin to speak up, to look him in the eye, so he asked again where they were going, even though he knew what the answer had been.

“He said he’s going to school,” Harry answered.

“The boy can speak for himself,” Pawlikowski said. He looked at his watch, making a show of it, as if telling time were a very, very complex matter, as if the calculation were a demanding one. “Didn’t school start about a half-hour ago?”

“Help my dad out with some things first,” Alvin said. His friends watched, as did Harry’s fellow business owners—a symmetry of three and three.

The big officer turned to Harry. “That would be Curtis?” Pawlikowski asked. “The tenant your sister told us about?” By now, Ilo had finished her phone order. She stood in the door frame, watching. By now, another small group of people had gathered, too, waiting for the next bus to come. It was like this—wave after wave of people, gathering, waiting, moving along, off somewhere, into the city. One woman at the bus stop had a small child by the hand, and the child wore a cowboy costume, a little hat, a neckerchief, boots, and at his waist, a small holster and shiny gun. The first and only sign of Halloween in the neighborhood. The little boy turned to watch the events in front of Harry’s store, but his mother turned him away, to look with her at the traffic on Grand River.

“Curtis is my tenant,” Harry said. “He and his son were helping me this morning, unpack a load of shoes.” Alvin looked at Harry, as did Ilo.

“I thought your sister said you just got in,” the officer said. “That you found this . . . defaced window a short time ago.”

Ilo began to speak, but Harry cut in. “Yeah,” Harry said. “An hour or so.”

It didn’t have to happen this way, but the statement was suspiciously meaningless, the clock was ticking, and Dunn lost patience—the standing around, the need to show something, to accomplish something.

“Okay, boys,” he said to Alvin and his friends, “turn and put your hands above your head, on the wall.” The small cowboy at the bus stop pulled his hand free from his mother’s and turned to see who had stolen his lines, whether his Halloween dream of the Wild West had come true.

The look on the faces of Alvin and his friends bore the same blank incredulity that Harry’s face had when he first found the three soapy words on his front window. The look of someone for whom the thus-far-narrowly-avoided and the present-time-reality have narrowed down to one.

The three friends put their books on the ground, splaying their hands against the wall. “That’s right,” Dunn said.

He started with Alvin, patting him under the arms of his cream and tan sweater, then down his sides, down his legs to his ankles. Dunn looked nervous—imagine, him, the nervous one—reaching in, as if trying to move a sprinkler without getting hit by the spray. He frisked the other two in the same jumpy way while everyone watched: the little cowboy, his mother (who had momentarily forgotten to shelter her young son), Stan, Bernie, Ilo. People in buildings across the street; people no one could even see.

“Officer,” Harry said. “Leave the boys alone.” A bus pulled off, picking up the small cowboy, who departed with his face pressed against the window. “What do you think you’re going to find? A bar of soap?”

Dunn looked at him, but he kept his hands where they were, on Otis’s sides, on his bright blue sweater.

“I said leave the boys alone.” Harry stepped closer. Even he was taller than Officer Dunn. “I’ve worked here a long time. I know these people. Let’s not make it into a bigger deal than it needs to be.”

The officers looked at each other, Dunn still leaning over Otis, his hands still on his body, not used to being told to stop what he was do-

ing. The power to make others do what he said was one of the few benefits of risking his life daily, of being called pig because he did what he'd been hired to do.

Harry was the first to see Curtis. He stood at a distance, near the narrow door that opened onto the steep staircase that led to his apartment. He was a big man, with smooth dark skin, Maxwell House–coffee dark. But unlike Pawlikowski, Curtis had learned to scale himself back, to become the kind of person thought of as a “decent Negro.” His eyeglasses helped, the way they teetered on the bridge of his nose, as did the navy blue workman pants and the clean white T-shirt, the clean handkerchief in his T-shirt pocket. Mostly, it was his downcast eyes, as if he'd gotten used to holding back his thoughts. Bernie and Stan knew him, felt comfortable enough with him to ask him over to do odd jobs sometimes. “My son causing trouble?” he asked. He saw the writing on Harry's window. “Did you write that?” he asked Alvin.

“No, sir,” Alvin answered.

“And your friends?” Curtis asked.

“No, sir,” Wendell and Otis answered.

“It's a misunderstanding,” Harry said. Ilo shook her head and went back into the building. “Like I said before, I'm not too worried about the window. I'll wash it off. We've all got things to do. How about we call it a Halloween prank and be done with it?”

The cars streamed in both directions. Dunn dropped his hands and straightened, stepped back. The traffic lights at Joy Road cycled red, yellow, green, red. Mrs. Johnston by now might have arrived at the school lunchroom where she worked and put on her apron. The little cowboy would soon be inching through his school day, thinking mostly of the magical evening ahead. Ruth would be shopping for Halloween candy on the two-for-one table, then rushing off to a meeting she'd been preparing for over the past weeks. Sappho would be sleeping in her favorite spot by the heat register in the corner of the dining room, the golden autumn sun streaming in on her through the window.

All along Appoline, the street where Harry lived and Sappho slept, were the green lawns and the elms, the oaks, the sugar maples, making their way through this transitional season—some still green, others bare, and then the glorious variants of in-between: the translucent reds and oranges, purples even, glowing in the autumn sun, against the bluest blue sky. The leaves would be clinging and falling and twirling along Outer Drive, the big boulevard that crossed Harry's block, and

adorning the grand houses, carpeting their lawns in colors so startling they had no names, unless you made them up—like raspberry parfait or Tropicana burnt orange, or translucent copper-pink.

Harry's daughter Lena would be settling into a front-row desk for her Communism, Fascism, and Democracy class at Wayne State, taught by a curly-haired charismatic professor with wire-rimmed glasses. Joanna would be shrinking down in her economics class at Mumford High School, hoping that the terrifying Mr. Bremen would not notice and call on her. And Franny, one of the few remaining white children in her class at MacDowell Elementary, might be passing a note to her friend Renee, another of the few remaining, making plans for the evening's trick-or-treating. But there on the sidewalk, the parties in the Honky Jew Boy incident were stalled. Not a tree, not a leaf, not a blade of grass on this stretch of Grand River, not a hint of the joys of autumn to soften the scene, and each participant waiting to see who would take charge, who would break the spell.

It was Pawlikowski: "We'll leave it at that, then," he said. He closed his notebook. The boys lowered their arms. They turned and straightened their clothes, Alvin first. Stan was high-blood-pressure red, the missed opportunity practically searing him, and Bernie threw down his cigarette.

"Gentlemen," Pawlikowski said, nodding to each member of the group in turn while he folded himself into the squad car. He saluted to Ilo, who had come back to the door.

Once Officer Dunn had started the engine, once the two cops had pulled off from the curb, once Ilo had gone inside with Curtis, who would get the window-cleaning things that Harry had dragged up from the basement, once the boys had gathered their books, getting ready to move on to school, now at least an hour late, Wendell, straightening his tie, looked at Harry, not into his face or his eyes, but generally, in his direction.

"We're not boys," he said.