

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SONG OF
MYSELF

A Gay Man's Odyssey of
Self-Discovery

Arnie Kantrowitz

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*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

—Walt Whitman,
“Song of Myself”

*Many will say it is a dream, and will not follow my inferences;
but I confidently expect a time when there will be seen, running
like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible and visible
worldly interests of America, threads of manly friendship, fond
and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-long, carried to degrees
hitherto unknown—not only giving tone to individual character,
and making it unprecedentedly emotional, muscular, heroic, and
refined, but having the deepest relation to general politics. I say
democracy infers such loving comradeship, as its most inevitable
twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain,
and incapable of perpetuating itself.*

—Walt Whitman,
“Song of Myself”

*Not for a moment, Walt Whitman, lovely old man,
Have I failed to see your beard full of butterflies . . .*

—Federico Garcia Lorca,
“Ode to Walt Whitman”

*Good morning, America, how are you?
Say, don't you know me? I'm your native son.*

—Steve Goodman,
“City of New Orleans”

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INTRODUCTION

by Lawrence D. Mass

Falling in love with Arnie Kantrowitz forty-three years ago, I inherited his extended family of Gay Liberation pioneers as my own—Vito Russo, the legendary gay and AIDS activist and author of *The Celluloid Closet*, and the likewise legendary Jim Owles, who initiated and led the struggle for gay civil rights legislation in New York City finally achieved fifteen years later, in 1987.

Talk about Gay Pride. I was living with three of the greatest figures of the post-Stonewall Gay Liberation Movement. I had found my family and my home.

As I read Arnie's novel, I kept thinking how true to life it was for him and us.

Song of Myself is the narrative of one gay man's odyssey of self-discovery through twentieth-century USA—a saga of sex, romance, love, adventure, history, humanity, heart, humor, and hope in times of brutal discrimination, oppression, and persecution.

The protagonist and narrator, Daniel Dell Blake, grows up in small-town America during the Depression and World War II years with no idea who he is, what tribe he belongs to, where and what to call home, who are his people. But, early on, he is given a touchstone to self-understanding that sets the trajectory of the rest of his life—Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's texts, incorporated throughout the novel, provide ongoing illumination into character and motivation, as well as the true nature, the gay heart and soul, of Walt Whitman.

Because of Whitman's status as America's greatest poet, and though it is now more widely accepted that Whitman was homosexual, there continues to be great resistance to openly and clearly acknowledging that Whitman was gay, especially in today's reactionary climate of homophobia and book-banning. Bringing Walt Whitman out of the closet was Arnie's lifelong cause as teacher and activist. It's a quest that infuses every aspect of *Song of Myself*.

Although Arnie discussed his novel with me as he was writing it, I don't recall any capstone statements or spelled-out revelations of intention that aren't already easily discernible in the text. As a writer, as he was otherwise by nature in real life, Arnie was startlingly honest and direct. The same is true of his protagonist and narrator. Arnie wanted to write a fictional version of his own story, of a boy coming of age in pre-liberation America whose muse, in life and writing, is Walt Whitman.

What I intuit to be the deeper subtext and value of Arnie's novel, a context Arnie himself never articulated as such, was this issue of pre-liberation gay people as children, students eager to learn and understand, but without clear role models or guideposts, wandering in adult lands insistent on ignorance and intolerance, without a sense of social acknowledgment, respect, or inclusivity of themselves—ourselves—as real people.

For indeed there was none. We were always in search of home, identity, history, and integrity.

In this sense, *Song of Myself* can seem of a piece with the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*, an icon of gay sensibility and experience released the same year as another of Arnie's favorite movies, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, based on the 1934 novella by James Hilton about a teacher beloved by his pupils.

Arnie himself spent more than forty years as a teacher at the College of Staten Island, CUNY, where he established a pioneering Gay Studies course. Like Mr. Chips, he was beloved by his students, many of whom were heterosexual, as he was more widely by his family and community. At the end of his semesters, he'd return home with handfuls of letters, testimonials of appreciation from his students. This "good-teacher sensibility" (with plenty of examples of bad teachers) is everywhere apparent in *Song of Myself*.

The experience of writing the novel, as observed by me, was like many other things in Arnie's life, including the ever-mounting demands of his worsening health. Arnie suffered from all the advanced major complications of diabetes, for which he was frequently hospitalized.

His writing was something he needed to do and wanted to do and that others kept urging him to do, and that he did with skill, purpose, and success, but which he found difficult to get down to the discipline of doing. He used to quote his closest friend, Vito Russo, about how he had to beat himself up to get to the typewriter.

Fortunately for us, Arnie managed to complete a draft of *Song of Myself* that he worked on for a decade and that his agent was able to submit to publishers. When it did not find a home, Arnie, still teaching full-time, put it aside.

Arnie Kantrowitz was inspired and inspiring, and though he could display remarkable grit, he was constitutionally vulnerable and wasn't self-important or personally ambitious. No matter how many times I would bring it up, no matter how gently and tactfully, Arnie, increasingly and eventually legally blind from his diabetes, not only didn't return to the novel, he didn't return to his writing at all.

Among his papers, which are being collected by the New York Public Library, fortunately not only was there a complete manuscript of *Song of Myself*, but also a collection of Arnie's poems. So private was Arnie about his poetry, that no one, including me, knew it existed. That collection hopefully will likewise be posthumously published.

When I began working with editor Patrick Merla on preparing *Song of Myself* for publication, I did so with commitment to gay history, culture, and literature. Arnie is a revered gay activist who is known for writing the Stonewall Classic, *Under The Rainbow: Growing Up Gay*, as an early officer of Gay Activists Alliance and of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).

What wasn't forefront in my thinking when I embarked on this journey was how trenchant this novel would be for gay life in these rapidly devolving, reactionary times. Indeed, it is all too contemporary.

Daniel Dell Blake's story resonates for all of us today. *Song of Myself* offers alternative possibilities for its ending. That sense of not knowing what the future holds seems especially true today, when conflicts around "truth," stupidity, ignorance, and meanness once again seize us at every turn.

I'm grateful to Patrick Merla for his editorial guidance. Thanks also for their support to Arnie's friends and colleagues at College of Staten Island, Maryann Feola, Judith Stelboun, and Matt Brim; to production coordinator Brian Schwartz and cover designer Tatiana Fernandez; to Lavelle Porter for his work on Walt Whitman and race; to Michael Rubin for his help with Japanese words and phrases; and to Michele Karlsberg, Bill Goldstein, Jaime Manrique, and David Bergman.

New York City
January 26, 2024

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Patrick Merla

Although Arnie Kantrowitz and I were not in frequent touch, I considered him a friend. I esteemed Arnie for his activism, integrity, knowledge, and place in gay history, both as a figure and witness. Arnie's memoir, *Under the Rainbow: Growing Up Gay*, was a formative book for me; I actually apartment-sat at the address on Spring Street mentioned in it, during my itinerant days taking care of other people's houses. And I consider Arnie's short biography of Walt Whitman an important text.

So I felt honored and pleased when Larry Mass asked me to work with him to bring Arnie's novel into print.

As Larry writes in his introduction, "*Song of Myself* is the narrative of one gay man's odyssey of self-discovery through twentieth-century USA—a saga of sex, romance, love, adventure, history, humanity, heart, humor, and hope in times of brutal discrimination, oppression, and persecution." Early on the narrator, Daniel Dell Blake, is given a copy of *Leaves of Grass* and Whitman becomes a sort of spiritual mentor, with Danny repeatedly seeking—and finding—personal meaning in Whitman's texts, citing them liberally throughout the book.

Daniel Dell Blake is a Gay Everyman who experiences personally or at close hand almost everything a member of a sexual minority could go through during the years 1924 to 1987. (In a way this reminds me of John Boyne's *The Heart's Invisible Furies*, which does something similar for a gay Irishman during the years 1945 through 2015; Arnie completed his own novel in 1992.) If this sounds didactic, *Song of Myself* itself is not. The adventures, mishaps, tragedies, and joys of Arnie's vivid characters are continually engaging, and sometimes quite moving.

The book's success is due in part to Arnie's rooting Danny's story in key historical events and places. (At one point, Danny meets Arnie at a political gathering.) Arnie's credentials as a scholar serve him well here. The depth of his research—in a period before the Internet and Google—yields rich results. A few anachronisms have been silently corrected.

Given that Arnie is no longer with us, the decision was made to simply copy edit the novel rather than do even minimal line editing. Similarly with dialogue: Characters are delineated in part by how they talk; today Arnie would have worked with a sensitivity reader, impossible now. We hope this will not be a drawback for most readers. The subtitle was added by Larry Mass.

– Song of Myself –

Danny states that the title page of his treasured edition of *Leaves of Grass* is dated 1892—making it Whitman’s final text. All quotes were verified by referring to the online Walt Whitman Archive (whitmanarchive.org), which includes reproductions of pages from the 1892 publication; or from comparable contemporary sources if they are not on the Whitman Archive site.

New York City
March 12, 2024



PROLOGUE

This book is not what it was supposed to be, but then neither am I. I first set out to write about Walt Whitman, whose work I've loved since I was a boy. The title *Song of Myself* was supposed to refer to him, but after spending many years futilely trying to make sense of the life he led a century before my time, I finally realized that I had to make sense of my own life first, so the *Myself* in the title will have to be me, Dell Blake. I hope you won't be disappointed.

The life I was originally expected to lead was a dull one, confined to the small town of Elysium, New York, where I was born. But somehow my years have been spread all across the American continent (along with an ill-fated sojourn in a hell of a paradise known as the South Pacific), and I've managed to have more than my share of exotic adventures. Without even trying, I have been an outrage to my family, my church, and my nation, but never to myself or to those I love. To society I'm some kind of alien weed growing in the wrong soil, but to my mind, I'm the natural vegetation of the American landscape—not the artificial, evenly manicured kind of grass that's found in overly cultivated yards, but a wilder sort of crabgrass that defies the best efforts of the gardeners to eradicate it because it's sturdy and can take root anywhere.

I know that anybody who puts his life into a book is going to be called an egotist. Walt was called worse than that for writing *Leaves of Grass*. But I've never been especially worried about what other people think, and I see no reason to start now. I'm recording my story because it's interesting, not because I'm an exceptional person. "Who holds this book holds a man," Walt would have said, but let's face it: Who holds this book holds a book. You can turn yourself inside out and examine yourself minutely and be as honest as you know how, and render your story in the most exquisite phrases imaginable, but you can't make more than an approximation of a real human being out of words. You can only make a book, and that's accomplishment enough.

It's a little embarrassing for a man of sixty-three to be still formulating the structure of his life, but I have a reason. I am about to inherit a twelve-

– Song of Myself –

year-old son, and no matter what kind of man he grows up to be, I hope he will be able to benefit from my experience. His father, the man I love, is in the next room, dying, and I have agreed to take his place when he is gone. I am not called “husband” or “wife,” “mother” or “father” in this family, but I am some of each. I am not even a “longtime companion,” having been present for less than two years. What I am is loved, respected, and trusted, and that is sufficient for me. Although there have been many kinds of men in my life, these two are the most important of all, and so here is how I want to dedicate my autobiography:

To Alexander, my son,
and to the memory of his first father, Aaron,
with love and thanks.

This is the second chance I will have at being a parent, and I am all the more grateful for it because I failed miserably at it the first time, many years ago. The problems of fatherhood are something of a tradition in my family, my own father having been a miserable wretch at the job, like his father before him. I need an antacid to look back at some parts of my past because, like most people my age, I find that the longer my memory grows, the sharper it gets. I’m not sure what I had for breakfast this morning, but I can recall the scenes of more than half a century ago as if I were right there, living through them all over again.

When I lived in Elysium as a boy in the 1920s, I was blond and wide-eyed and apple-cheeked and full of spunk. Now in the late 1980s, my hair is gray, my face looks ruttled with travel, my skin sags and flutters, and my energy, like a hired relative, takes occasional days off without notice. Even the luster in my eyes is beginning to grow dimmer. But I’m sure that’s an indication of having seen so much and not a sign that my enthusiasm has diminished. In the end, it doesn’t matter what I may look like. What matters is whether I am ready for the task that lies before me.

Daniel Dell Blake



PART I
DANIEL DELL BLAKE

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain
part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

—Walt Whitman,
“There Was a Child Went Forth”



CHAPTER ONE

“**A**ll flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass.” My father read from his Bible as I tried to stifle a yawn. He peered at me, over the top of the book, which he held in his hands like a weapon. Clearing his throat, he continued. “The grass withereth and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth forever.” I, meanwhile, was imagining how I’d look in Theda Bara’s dark eye makeup. I’d seen a picture of her in an old movie poster at the general store. I’d never been to a movie yet, but I planned to see one as soon as I could get to Syracuse on my own. I knew I was going to love it. My father closed the book with a solid thump and looked at me. “Is that clear, Daniel?”

“Yeth, Father,” I said, hoping he wouldn’t start carrying on about my lisp again. If I said the passage wasn’t clear, I knew I was in for a twenty-minute lecture on the virtue of minding God’s words, which still wouldn’t make them any clearer. If he got worked up about my lisp, I was afraid he would end up hitting me and calling me names. I chose the safest course and hoped for the best.

“Good, then tell me what it means.”

“It meanth . . . uh . . . I’m not sure I can thay.”

“Daniel, were you paying attention?”

“Yeth, Father.”

“Then what does the passage tell you?”

“It tellith me that the grath dieth young.”

“Is that all?”

“And we die young too?” I was guessing, but something like that was usually the message of what my father read, so I knew I couldn’t be too far off the mark.

“Amen,” he said. “And therefore you must not be . . . ?”

I riffled through the answers I knew he was probably looking for: Proud? Slothful? Greedy? It had to be one of the sins that caused grief to Jesus and shut Him out of your life. Those were his favorites. “Vain,” I guessed.

“That’s right, boy. Sometimes you surprise me. I was sure you were dreaming about something else.”

That shows you how well my father knew me. Bible reading was the only communication we had, aside from his assigning me chores. My childhood wasn't as bad as some, but it was a little short on nurture.

Since there was no breast handy when I was a baby, if I nursed on anything it was probably an apple. I was raised in an apple orchard, and Mrs. Varner, our housekeeper, had all she could do to keep up with the supply. She made applesauce and apple pie, Apple Brown Betty and apple fritters, apple pandowdy, baked apples, apple cake, apple cider, and in between she served just plain raw apples from the root cellar. I suppose I liked apples in the beginning, and I spent many a childhood afternoon sitting in the attic window with one of them in my hand and a good book in the other, but eventually I couldn't look an apple in the cheek without wanting to throw up. And that goes for all those songs, too—"(I'll Be With You) In Apple Blossom Time" and "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree (With Anyone Else But Me)" and "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White." They all nauseate me. Johnny Appleseed is no hero of mine.

Aside from the apple trees, I didn't have much in the way of company in my early years. Mrs. Warner was a thin, tight-lipped, bony-cheeked widow with straggly hair that refused to stay tucked in its knot at the back of her head. She worked hard for my father and didn't have much to talk about aside from cooking and cleaning and God. She must have been a real masochist. The more God abused her, the more she loved Him. First He made one of her legs considerably shorter than the other, so she had to wear a heavy, built-up shoe as she limped through her life. Then He let her marry one of the poorest men in the valley, who beat her up regularly and blessed her with four sickly children. Finally, He took all her family away in a fire, and left her a thankless job with my father to spin out the rest of her miserable days. The only thing she could do in response to all this mistreatment was thank God and praise His name between scrubbing floors and ironing shirts and cooking those damned apples. I figure she was afraid to look ungrateful for fear that worse would be done to her, which is as good a reason for piety as any. I always wondered if she had committed some extravagant sin like murder or failing to honor her parents and had accepted her lot as a just punishment. But I wasn't about to ask her anything so personal and unleash one of her cautionary sermons about pleasing the Lord. I was only too glad to keep out of her misbegotten way.

My father was even worse company. I can't quite say I lived with him. We just slept in the same house. He was a bald, skinny man with stone gray eyes and a chiseled gray face composed of hard planes and angles. He spent most of his time by himself. "Keeping his own counsel" he called it. "Psychotic" is my word for it. His happiest mood was sullenness, and from there his emotions ran the gamut from disgust to anger to mind-your-own-damned-business: a real friendly sort of guy. I suppose I shouldn't be so

harsh on the old man. He couldn't help what life made him any more than anybody else can, even if he did bring most of his own misery on himself.

Like Mrs. Warner, he talked about God a lot, but I never got the feeling that he really meant it. It was hard to tell with him. His version of enthusiasm was anyone else's idea of sarcasm. He never had that special light that some people get in their eyes when they talk about God, but he sure was a stickler for the rules in the Bible, which didn't include the use of such civilities as "please" or "thank you." So he usually communicated with a jerk of his head or a grunt or just a stone glare, unless he had something critical to say. I was glad he preferred the company of his apples to my own and Mrs. Warner's. He treated us both with contempt, and we did our best to ignore him.

I never knew my mother. My father wouldn't discuss her, except to tell me she was dead. I didn't even know what she looked like. There were no pictures of her in the house. There were no pictures of anything worth looking at, just the same blue Maxfield Parrish prints that almost every living room in town sported and no one paid any attention to. They probably grew on the walls like fungus in our part of the state. Wondering if my mother had been the one to pick them out from some tacky catalogue, I tried to find some other clue to who she had been. She wasn't buried in the family plot with the other relatives. She didn't seem to be anywhere. Finally, while rummaging in an attic drawer, I found my birth certificate, which announced that Daniel Dell Blake had been born on June 28, 1924. The "Dell" was news to me. I had only known myself as Daniel Blake until then. My father's name was written in his usual dark and angular hand: "John Ezra Blake." My mother's name looked carefully inscribed, in strong, elegant strokes: "Helen Dell Blake." I studied the signature for an hour, looking for some inkling of the woman who had held the pen. She was short, or maybe tall fat—no, slim, and beautiful: at least beautiful. But the only thing I ever knew about her was that she knew how to sign her name clearly.

We lived a couple of miles outside of Elysium, New York, which in the 1920s was little more than a general store with a post office inside, a two-room schoolhouse, and a small white church. A few dozen Victorian-style clapboard houses were strung along four or five wide, shady streets, most with elaborate gingerbread cutouts framing their spacious front porches, so the people who sat quietly sipping their lemonades there on silent summer afternoons looked like yellowed photographs from the nineteenth century waiting for somebody to come along and dust them.

On Sundays my father drove Mrs. Warner and me into town in his battered pickup truck, and we sat through the endless sermons delivered by Reverend Friendly, a cherubic-looking man who droned on monotonously for what seemed like hours without raising or lowering his pitch even slightly, so that staying awake was truly a service to God, at least as far as I was concerned. I think even Jesus would have nodded off. His wife played

a small organ (no pun intended), and their five children sat right beneath the pulpit, where their father could watch them being bored and be sure that they didn't squirm in front of the congregation.

My father saw himself as God's warden. Whenever my head began to droop—which was pretty often—I got his sharp elbow in my ribs, and on the Sundays when the good Reverend was especially dull, my side became black-and-blue. Mrs. Warner sat on the other side of my father, lapping it all up, or maybe praying for a little mercy—I couldn't tell which. It was the high point of her wretched week. For all our disconnectedness, the three of us probably looked like a model family, lined up in our pew. I learned early that appearances are deceiving.

I suppose Mrs. Warner did her lackluster best, but if anyone was my spiritual parent during childhood, it was Martha. “Martha” was no more than a single name without identification or dates, surrounded by a simple circle carved on a plain white slab of granite at the edge of the family plot in the graveyard which abutted our orchard. Some of my earliest companions were in that graveyard. (Don't worry, I'm not a necrophiliac. But I did develop a special feeling for the dead very early in my life because, however silent they were, at least they didn't have the limitations of the living.)

Martha could have been anyone. I guessed immediately that she was my mother, but Mrs. Varner assured me that she was not and cautioned that I'd better not ask my father about Martha if I wanted to avoid a scene. So I made up my own stories about her and adjusted them from time to time to suit my changing moods. Sometimes she became a princess who'd been exiled from her exotic country for loving the wrong man, lived out her life in lonely anonymity on the road, and died in the snow at our doorstep. At other times she was a demented distant cousin who had been driven to insanity by the cruel coldness of her relatives and had died in a madhouse far away, in such degradation that her name was an embarrassment to the family. Sometimes she wasn't even a person at all, but a beloved lapdog belonging to some doting great aunt I never knew. I could always trust Martha to be whoever I needed her to be, and I told her all my childhood secrets and woes.

The other family gravestones had more explicit information on them. There were over two dozen of them: “Dear Wife Abigail Emerson Blake, 1835-1886”; and “James Blake, Six Years Olde, Crushed by Tree, 1860”; and the most timeworn, “Ezra Blake, 1721-1770, When thif you fee, remember me / The image of what ye fhall be.” I had no idea what “thif” and “fee” and “fhall” meant unless they were misspellings, so I imagined that Great-Great-Grandpa Ezra might have had a lisp like mine, and I felt a special connection to him until I was years older and knew something about the eighteenth-century alphabet—and then I found the old boy kind of witty, especially compared to his miserable descendent, my father. I tried to

imagine little James and Dear Wife Abigail and the two Johns, John Noah and John Jeremiah. But mostly I imagined Martha, who for me was the star of the cemetery.

My father rarely came out to the graveyard, which was just beyond a far corner of the orchard and shielded by apple trees. So I made it my special refuge whenever I wanted to get away from him, at least during the good weather. In the winter I had no choice, because snowstorms covered the ground from Thanksgiving to Easter and, like it or not, I was stuck in the house, where I was left to my own devices as long as I didn't make too much noise. My father stayed in his room a lot, and Mrs. Warner spent most of her time in the kitchen. So I lived inside my own head, in a land populated with pretend companions. I really wanted a doll to play with, but I knew that was out of the question; so I scoured the attic and found a faded old red braided-silk tassel with a large button top intended for disguising picture hooks where they protruded from the molding near the ceiling. It was an elegance scorned by my father, and I have no idea where it came from, but I pretended it was a doll and spent many hours crooning to it and putting it carefully to bed in a drawer where it was safe from the grown-ups. I named it Eve after the biblical character my father railed against most, calling her "evil temptress" and "the mother of sin," although I never understood what someone in his line of work could possibly have against anyone for sharing an apple.

One snowy day as I hung around the house, I noticed that the door to Mrs. Warner's room was ajar. Peering inside, I saw that no one was there. I assumed that she was probably down in the kitchen as usual, so I decided to explore. Her extra pair of special shoes stood neatly under the bed. The left one was built up with a thick sole and a high heel. My curiosity got the better of me, and I took off my own shoes and tried them on. I walked as quietly as I could on the threadbare carpet that covered the floor, enjoying the feeling of being so off balance.

I don't know what possessed me then, but I went to her closet where her wardrobe of drab dresses hung. They were nothing like the glamorous, short, beaded flapper dresses I'd seen in magazines. The colors were dark and the materials serviceable. They were all cut similarly, with long sleeves and prudent necklines. I chose a maroon one, slipped it on over my clothes, and hobbled over to the plain framed mirror, to see what I had wrought. The hem gathered in a ridiculous puddle around my feet, although when Mrs. Warner wore it, it came down only to her ankles. I cradled my imitation doll in my arms against the sagging pleated bodice and crooned, "Sleep, baby Eve, sleep," feeling at the same time soothingly maternal and thrilled with the danger of being caught at a game I was sure was forbidden, even though it had never been discussed. I thought I heard a sharp intake of someone's breath, almost a gasp, in the hall just outside the room, and I turned quickly

to see if someone were there. I was almost sure I saw a sudden motion, as if someone were hastily withdrawing from the doorway. It had to be Mrs. Warner! I stood motionless for a minute or two to try to hear a sound, but there was none. Then I moved like a whirlwind to rid myself of the absurd dress and shoes. I replaced them carefully where I had found them and fled from the room, holding Eve by the knob that I pretended was her head.

I found Mrs. Warner was downstairs in the kitchen, but she didn't look up when I walked noisily in behind her. The usual silence was observed at the supper table, and I wasn't about to ask any damning questions. So I tried to annul the memory of that scene and did all I could not to arouse any further suspicion.

April turned the branches of the apple trees red, and I would run out to the orchards daily to check them for the first buds of spring, which meant liberation from the house. When they blossomed into miraculous white clouds in May, I was in paradise, far away from the drabness of winter. One year when the blossoms had just fallen and covered the ground like a layer of fragrant snow, I danced gleefully among the trees, sprinkling handfuls of petals behind me, imagining myself a satyr, minus the pipes, celebrating the rites of Bacchus. I was so lost in my reverie that I didn't hear my father approach until it was too late, and when I turned and found myself looking at the consternation in his gray face, I said placatingly, "Ithn't it a lovely day?"

He slapped me and said, "Don't use that word. It isn't manly. And stop that damnable lispin before I take you to have your tongue trimmed. You sound disgusting, like a lizzie." Of course I didn't ask him what a "lizzie" was. Somehow I knew it had something to do with being sissified, and I didn't want to have my frail masculinity challenged. So I determined that I would avoid saying the letter "s" as much as possible, which caused me to resort to some pretty convoluted phrasing—and that probably had the benefit of sharpening my awareness of words. I didn't say "lovely" again for a long time, at least not when my father was around, and I always checked to be sure I was alone before I let myself act the way I felt. But the next spring when I tried to dance among the apple blossoms, it just wasn't fun anymore, so I gave it up.

In the summer, when the trees were a rich shade of green, I would stay out after supper until dusk, just to be by myself. Before I went indoors, I used to say good night to each thing in the landscape—to the grass and rocks, the trees and the apples, the clouds and the stars—one by one. There was so much magic in it that it took me half an hour to get ready to go in, and by then, if I was lucky, my father would be asleep. On the way in, I used to catch fireflies in my cupped hands, trying to capture their glow for myself. Once I brought a glass jar with holes punched in its metal lid and caught seventeen of them and put them inside. The jar glowed with a beautiful, frail

light almost constantly. I left the jar of fireflies behind Martha's stone and said good night to it as well, but when I came back the next day, all the fireflies were dead, and I promised myself never to kill anything else again if I could help it.

In the fall, the leaves in the orchard turned bright yellow-orange, and the apples hung in heavy clusters that filled the air for miles with their scent. In late August the William Tells were ready, and in early October the McIntoshes and then the Cortlands, each kind in its turn. But I was not there to enjoy them once I started school.

The one-room schoolhouse on the edge of town was run by Miss Standish, who seemed as stern as my father. She taught about twenty students a year, ranging from kindergarten to eighth grade, and she terrorized the smallest and largest of her charges with the same ease. Even the thirteen-year-olds, who were ready for the trip to Valley High School, withered under her stern glances. Her solid black hair was done up in a large bun that protruded from the nape of her neck like Olive Oyl's and was balanced by her large nose, on which was perched a pince-nez which fell off several times an hour, whenever she raised her eyebrows. She never failed to catch the falling eyeglasses with her free hand before they tautened the long black ribbon by which they were suspended from her neck, and she never missed a word while performing this feat. The apples I occasionally brought her were received as her due, with a cool-but-courteous "Thank you, Daniel." But if her glance ever warmed slightly, I couldn't see it.

She kept us constantly busy naming the chief exports of South America, multiplying fractions, or making endless lines of ovals with our scratchy straight pens, which we cleaned with chamois pen wipers, trying to avoid points off for the inevitable inkblots that marred the perfect pages she demanded. Her favorite form of torture was memorization. I can still hear the dutiful voices reciting her favorite, "O Captain! My Captain!":

But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

Miss Standish acted as if it was a passage from the Bible or something, the way she insisted on perfection in our recitations. But I had a hard enough time not giggling when it was my turn, because instead of the death of Abraham Lincoln, I kept thinking of a valentine gone rotten. She said its author, Walt Whitman, was a great man, but it took a little more reading to convince me.

Miss Standish lived in the town with another spinster, Miss Betsy Binder, who was the part-time librarian in a small room attached to the schoolhouse. She was the opposite of Miss Standish. Her face always had a believably

sweet expression. Her dresses were patterned with tiny flowerets, and she always kept a large cameo brooch at her throat, unlike Miss Standish, who wore tailored suits with ankle-length skirts and a small, grim bow tie. Miss Binder wore her hair in a Marcel wave instead of a bun, but she had a pince-nez just like Miss Standish's, except that Miss Binder's spectacles never fell off in public. Maybe she never needed to raise her eyebrows because she was too innocent or too tolerant to be easily shocked. I don't know how they got along on the tiny salaries the town could afford to pay them. Possibly they had some private means of support. But few had much to spare during the Great Depression, so their genteel poverty was not much different from most people's.

Once I discovered the library, Miss Binder became the mother of my secret world. She introduced me to the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, with whom I fell in love immediately. I used to read their fairy tales out by Martha's stone in the graveyard, because I knew my father would never approve of such frivolous readings. He stuck to the Bible and the Sears Roebuck catalogue while I liked "The Red Shoes" and "The Ugly Duckling." But most of all I liked "The Little Mermaid" for its wistful story of hopeless lovers from separate worlds.

It was Miss Binder who helped me to get over my lisp. When I asked for her help, she responded with patient training, and taught me that I could keep my tongue behind my teeth when I had to say "s." As soon as I had practiced enough, I found that I didn't have to watch every word in order to avoid the sound of "s," and I felt as if my speech had been unchained.

"I will be eternally grateful," I told her.

"A simple 'thank you' will suffice, Daniel," she said with a smile.

"Yes, if you say so, 'thank you' will suffice," I said, relishing all the "s" sounds.

"There's no need to show off your new skill," she said, "but I am proud of you." And she hugged me so closely that I could smell the faint traces of her bath soap.

I loved Miss Binder, so I spent as much time in her library as I could and brought her apples whenever possible. Unlike Miss Standish, she always responded with a thank you and a hug, and soon she began to invite me to her home, where she and Miss Standish and I had little tea parties. Their parlor wasn't very different from ours. Like most places in town, it looked as if the main effort in decorating was not to appear too individual. Nevertheless, it was my idea of a great place to be. It was papered with a faded floral pattern on which hung a picture—but not the usual blue Maxfield Parrish. Their picture was a photograph of two large white flowers, nestled against each other like lovers and lit in some miraculous way that made them seem to glow with an almost erotic invitation to enter their deep, mysterious centers. I had never seen a photograph framed as art before, only

the usual cluster of uncle and grandma portraits that most of the neighbors set out in small armies on tables covered with fringed cloths. I thought those flowers were the most beautiful thing in town, but I was equally drawn to a small pink marble sculpture that stood on its own separate wall shelf. It looked vaguely like two men wrestling, but that was probably my imagination. It was a convoluted jumble of curves and angles that might have been anything. I loved to trace my fingertips along its cool stone swells and creases. Carved into its base was the sculptor's signature: Chester Lane Stewart. "This is a gift from a former pupil," Miss Standish explained. "He's an artist now." In the middle of the room there was a worn settee with a carved wood frame and a lace antimacassar pinned to its back, facing two plump armchairs done up in the same accessories. All of them had doilies carefully placed at the ends of their arms, attempting to hide the worn patches. The Misses Standish and Binder sat in the armchairs, and I perched in the middle of the settee. I liked to imagine that the floor lamp with the fringed dome shade was a dancer that would take off and whirl about the room when I wasn't looking. But nothing that exciting could ever have happened in Elysium, New York, and it always stood there like a weary sentinel, waiting for the excitement to begin. The center of the floor was covered by a round, braided rag rug on which sat a small table with a blue china tea service and a plate of plain, round butter cookies.

"I hope you like these, Daniel," Miss Standish said. "Miss Binder baked them herself."

"Yes," I said, afraid that the crumbs from the one in my mouth would betray me and spill out over my chin. "I like them very much. You're a wonderful baker, Miss Binder."

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Daniel," Miss Standish cautioned. "It isn't polite."

"Hush, Myra," interceded Miss Binder. "He means well. Let him enjoy himself. We're not in school now." To my amazement, Miss Standish sputtered slightly, but did not demur. I got the distinct impression that Miss Binder was the boss at home, and Miss Standish's toughness was saved for the classroom. I was never quite as frightened of her again, but I was never disobedient either.

"Do you have any friends outside of school, Daniel?" Miss Binder continued.

"No, ma'am, there's nobody my age near enough to our farm. I like some of the kids in school, but most of the time I keep my own counsel." I hoped Miss Standish was impressed with my adult phrase, but she didn't lose her pince-nez over it.

"Sounds serious," Miss Binder said. "You must be lonely."

"I'm not lonely right now," I answered, bringing a faint smile even to Miss Standish's lips.

After that I visited the two women as often as they allowed me to, which was about once a month or so. Miss Standish still kept her distance, but she did seem a tiny bit softer at home than she did at school. Miss Binder, on the other hand, grew warmer and warmer. She always had something new for me to read. I progressed from fairy tales to animal stories to the Hardy Boys adventures to Horatio Alger’s books. She was always one step ahead of my eager imagination, as if she knew my fantasy life better than I did myself.

Eventually I was confiding my childhood hopes and fears to her, hungry for someone to hear them, which she did with a sympathetic ear, not at all shocked, even when I told her I thought I was different from the other boys. They were busy with more manly occupations than the reading of fairy tales and stories, at least according to my father, who was beginning to grumble that I was becoming a bookworm and a sissy.

“Don’t you worry about it, Daniel,” Miss Binder consoled me. “There is a place for everyone in God’s world.”

When I was about twelve, my body began to change, and for the first time I didn’t feel comfortable asking Miss Binder for advice. I was appalled by my first straggly pubic hairs, but the first time I had an erection, I was quite impressed with myself. I knew a thing or two about sex from seeing the local barnyard animals at play, but there were still lots of unexplained mysteries. My first orgasm happened in my sleep. I dreamed that my father came to my room wearing his long winter underwear, which I knew he changed no more often than once a week, even though he slept in it. He sat on my bed and held me close, so that I could smell the accumulated odors of his body that had settled into the begrimed cloth, and I was embarrassed because I was getting aroused. Then he kissed me on the lips, and that’s when I woke up to find my nightclothes dripping with semen. I washed my pajamas myself and hid them in the attic to dry, not wanting to offend Mrs. Warner, who, despite having borne four children, seemed not to acknowledge that she possessed a body. The next few nights were spent guiltily trying to concentrate on my father before I fell asleep, hoping that I would have the same dream and the same exciting sensations. I didn’t know how else to make it happen, until I found out at school that fall. What better place was there to learn the facts of life?

The only other boy my age in the schoolhouse was Adam Witherspoon. Adam was nobody’s idea of a dreamboat. He was gawky and pimply, with a nose that looked like it belonged on somebody else’s face. We were friendly enough, but we had never visited outside of school, since he lived on a farm a few miles from ours, which was too far to walk without a specific purpose. I figured that he might know what I was trying to learn, so I decided to keep my eye on him and if I thought he knew anything, I would give him a reason to visit me.

One day I arrived early at school and went out back to the privy, where I found the door locked from inside. I waited for my turn, but instead of the usual disgusting noises, I heard hard breathing and moaning and grunting. Finally there was a little cry and then a long, deep sigh. I don't know what told me, but I knew I was on the trail of what I was looking for.

When the door finally opened, Adam Witherspoon emerged. He had a weird look on his face when he saw me standing there. "Daniel, what are you doing here so early?" he said, sounding embarrassed.

"Spying," I said, just to kid him, but he didn't think it was very funny.

"Minding your own business would be a better idea," he said. "Then I guess I shouldn't tell you about the white goo all over your pants," I countered. There wasn't any, but it was a lucky guess. He turned all red and looked down at his pants in a panic. When he didn't find anything there, he gave me a disgusted look and walked off. I watched his trousers slide across his buns as he walked toward the school, and I wondered what it would be like to touch his body. I was so eager that even Frankenstein's monster would have held some appeal for me at that point.

During recess, Adam was standing by himself, staring at a yellow roadster which was parked near the schoolyard. A well-developed man's backside covered by work pants was all that could be seen of a mechanic whose torso was hidden under the hood. If I had had a camera, I would have begun my career in photography right there. I was so enthusiastic that it didn't even occur to me that Adam might be more interested in the car than in the buttocks it was framing.

"That's nice, isn't it?" I said, tiptoeing up behind him.

"Are you practicing to be a sneak or what?" he said, startled.

"What do you want me to do, knock? There isn't any door here, you know." I looked toward the car. "I wish he'd take me for a spin."

"Don't you know whose car that is?" he said, not understanding what I really wanted. "It's Chester Stewart's. Isn't it swell?"

"It sure is," I said. At that moment the mechanic stood up and wiped his forearm across his brow. His wavy auburn hair glinted in the sun as he glanced our way, and I could see that beneath the dirty workman's coveralls there was a clean, handsome gentleman. Then my mind registered the name I had just heard, and I remembered the sculpture in Miss Binder's parlor. "Do you mean Chester Lane Stewart?"

"Ayuh," he replied with the twang native to upstate New York. "I wish I had all the money that Chester inherited when his father died last year. I'd buy seven cars, one for each day of the week."

"What colors would they be?"

"Any colors. What a stupid question. It's what's under the hood that counts."

Noticing that the auburn-haired man had returned to his work, I said suggestively, “I’d like to see what’s under the hood right now.”

“You’re weird,” Adam said, and wrestled me to the ground. I let him get on top of me without too much struggle, and he sat on my chest, not knowing what to do next. My groin started to stir from the contact, and I could see his was swelling too.

“I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours,” I said, hoping he wouldn’t hit me.

“Who wants to see your old weenie? It’s probably no bigger than this!” He thrust his pinky in front of my face.

“It is, too—but I don’t know if it’s any bigger than anybody else’s. How big is yours?”

“Big enough,” he said.

I seized my chance. “Does white stuff come out of the end?”

“I thought you knew so much about it,” he said. “You talked pretty smart this morning.”

Just then Miss Standish intervened. “Adam! Daniel! Get up from there this instant! I won’t have you boys fighting on school property. You’ll both write in your notebooks one hundred times, ‘I must not fight in the schoolyard.’ Now march!”

When we stood up to brush ourselves off, I could see that we both had erections tenting the fronts of our trousers. We immediately hid them by holding our books in front of ourselves. “Meet me after school,” Adam said.

As we walked past Miss Standish’s scowl and into the schoolhouse, I turned for a last look toward the yellow roadster. The auburn-haired man had emerged again and was looking after us with a curious smile on his face. I have never forgotten that moment. It was the handsomest face and the most appealing smile I have ever seen in my life.

After school, Adam took the bus home with me and we went into my father’s orchard, where we compared erections under the apple trees. My first reaction was horror. They were different! Where he had a loose fold of skin encircling the head of his, I had nothing.

“How did you grow that extra piece?” I asked.

“I was born with it. All boys are.”

“Then where’s mine?” I inquired. I was embarrassed and tried to hide myself.

He took my hands away from my crotch.

“You’ve been cut,” he said. “Circumcised.”

“What’s that mean?” I asked. “Who did it?”

“It means the doctor cut off your foreskin when you were born, to keep it clean. How does it feel?”

“How do I know? I don’t remember what it felt like to have one.”

“Mine feels good when I slide it,” he said. “Hey, look at this!” He stuck his fingers under the rim and stretched it out into a kind of square, framing the round head. It looked kind of scary, as if it could rip, and I felt myself growing squeamish. But he seemed to be enjoying himself, and my distaste soon turned to jealousy, so I continued my comparison. They were about the same length, give or take half an inch, but his was skinnier and had a bigger head. Mine was better-looking, I decided. But a good deal of research since then has proved it to be a pretty average model.

I was average-looking all around, not too tall or short, not too fat or thin or handsome or ugly—just average. And that was fine with me, because I never felt quite like everybody else inside, and I was glad my appearance didn’t give that fact away. I had sandy blond hair, which Mrs. Warner cut in bangs straight across my forehead; gray eyes; a straight, slightly upturned nose that, unlike Adam’s, looked pretty good right where it was; and a firm, square chin that I presumed was my mother’s gift because my father’s was pointed.

Adam was something like a stork, with a long beak and a gangly walk, but his looks didn’t matter to me as much as what he could teach me about what he held in his hand.

“Show me how the cream comes out,” I said.

“Okay, but I think you’re supposed to save it for your wife. It might be a sin or something if you do it to yourself. But I did it a few times anyway, and it feels real good—kind of high, like when you drink hard liquor.”

“I see,” I said, although I had never tasted anything harder than cider in my life. I had felt a little dizzy after drinking it once, and I guessed that was what Adam meant, but I wasn’t about to show him all my ignorance in one day. “Let me see you do it.”

He started, and then I imitated him, and it felt great once the rhythm got going, each of us pumping at his own rate. And then the cream spurted from his, and mine followed suit, spurting all over the ground, and we watched it sink into the soil.

“Let’s do it again,” I said. “I liked that.”

“You have to wait a few minutes,” he told me. “It takes a while to build up.”

“I have to go in pretty soon. Can we try this again sometime?”

“I guess so.” He didn’t seem as enthusiastic about it as I was.

“Do you think it’s weird or anything? I mean, two boys doing it together?”

“I don’t see why, but it might be,” he said. “I just don’t know.”

“Who can we ask?”

“Nobody. You’d better not talk about this, Daniel. We could get into a lot of trouble.”

“Don’t worry. Who would I tell?” I assured him, picking a couple of nearly ripe apples from a tree and handing him one. I knew I was disobeying my father’s injunction to eat only those apples that had already been picked, but I didn’t care. We sat there and ate them together without saying anything else. Then he picked up his schoolbooks and started home. “See you,” he called over his shoulder.

“Ayuh,” I said.

An hour later I had a bellyache, and I wondered if it was some sort of punishment—not for eating an unripe apple, but for what I’d done. Then I decided that I couldn’t be held responsible for disobeying rules no one had ever told me about, and I thought about Adam’s foreskin and played with myself until I had another orgasm.

There were some questions I just had to have the answers to, I decided, and there were no choices about who could provide them. At dinner that night, I broke the customary silence and addressed my father. “Are you circumcised?” I asked.

He nearly swallowed his spoon. “What business could that be of yours?”

“I don’t have a foreskin like the other boys.”

“Too bad for you, isn’t it?”

“I thought you were so pious. If God put it there, why did you have it removed?”

“Your mother did it,” he said, returning to his beef stew, and I knew that was the end of the conversation. He had never once mentioned her in two consecutive sentences. This was as major a piece of my mother’s puzzle as any I had yet retrieved, but there was no way to pursue it. I looked at him for some sign that he might relent, but he met my glance with his cold, stone eyes, and I faded back into silence while Mrs. Warner brought in the applesauce.

Adam and I met secretly half a dozen times during the next year. We taught each other whatever we could, which wasn’t much. We didn’t know what two men could do together, and he wasn’t willing to try out the exotic ideas I worked so hard at dreaming up, so we eventually got pretty bored. I played with myself pretty often, and on two or three of those occasions I borrowed my father’s long johns from the hamper and put them on because their aroma was arousing, even if their owner’s personality was not.

By the end of the school year, I had graduated from Miss Standish’s school. There was a small ceremony, but my father didn’t come because he was busy pruning his trees.

When I first got to Valley High School, I told everyone my name was “Dell Blake,” hoping to add a little elegance to my drab identity. But when they called me, I didn’t answer, so I soon settled for “Danny.” Adam and I played together one or two times after we began classes at our new school, but we soon drifted into different circles of friends. It wasn’t long before he

started dating Sally Wayne, whose breasts were a school legend. It was a bigger world with more kinds of people, so I hoped I'd meet somebody to take his place, but even though I was as sociable as I could be, I had no really close friends at first. I was popular enough in a general sort of way, but I was always being careful not to let anyone know how much the senior football players aroused me—or the local farmhands, or the English teacher, or the school janitor. I kept my lust to myself, and I imagine that my guardedness didn't encourage others to be on more intimate terms with me.

I ordinarily wouldn't have said anything when the yellow roadster drove past the lunchtime crowd on the school's front lawn, and somebody near me whispered, "There goes that Chester Stewart. I hear he's a real cornholer."

Although I'd never heard the word before, I instinctively guessed that "cornholer" meant something sexual, and I grew excited, remembering Chester's appealing smile. But I managed to play innocent in spite of myself and asked, "Why, because he drives a yellow car?"

"Don't be a jerk. There's something queer about him. As far as anybody knows he's never had a girlfriend around here. He calls himself an artist, and he makes weird statues," was the answer.

Someone else added, "My father's on the town council, and he says Chester wants to put up a statue full of strange shapes and half-naked people. He says I should keep away from men like that."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure. Artists, I guess."

"Do you know anything about artists?" I asked. "Are they all queer?"

"I don't know," he answered. "I never met one."

"Neither did I," was my answer. But right then and there I decided that, one way or another, I would meet Chester Stewart.



CHAPTER TWO

I convinced my father to take me to the next town meeting on the grounds that I should know something about local affairs. It was the first overt interest I had ever shown in politics, so I suppose he thought it was a good idea, but he certainly didn't pat me on the head about it. Of course I found most of the meeting stultifying. Financing the paving of dirt roads has never been high on my list of hot conversation topics. But Chester had no trouble holding my interest.

He stood out among the drab farmers like a lily in a wheat field. It wasn't that he was a showy dresser. His clothes did have a more citified cut and a richer fabric and color, but they were simple and dignified. Still, there was obviously something special about his person that had nothing to do with money or clothes. People didn't part before him like the Red Sea before Moses or anything like that, but somehow there was always a little extra space around him, whether he was walking, standing, or sitting still. His yellow roadster was the only flashy thing about him, and in the parking field behind the church there was a little space around it too, as if the battered pickup trucks and square black sedans were afraid to come too close.

We were sitting a few rows behind him, and I didn't hear one word of the proceedings because I was so busy staring at the back of his head. I had been reading about animal magnetism, and I was trying to exercise my will power to make him turn around, so I could look at his face. I wanted to drink in his beauty. I wanted to do things I didn't even dare think about, except that they started with some heavy kissing. I was so busy concentrating that I actually started to sink down in my seat, which earned me a jab in the ribs from my father's elbow. "Sit up straight and pay attention," he warned. "I didn't bring you here to lollygag." Dear old Dad, always such a sensitive soul. But my efforts hadn't been in vain. In the middle of the discussion about the feasibility of building a spur from the nearest railroad line, Chester turned around and stared straight at me for a moment—or at least so I fancied. He might have been just trying to figure out how crowded the place was, but I took the credit anyway.

He looked more earnest than seductive, but I fell madly in love nonetheless. His auburn hair was neatly combed into waves that set off his bright green eyes. He had a startlingly straight nose, beneath which he wore

a small, closely trimmed mustache like Clark Cable's. His lips were thin, but they seemed sensuous to me, and his firm jaw promised strength of character. When he finally rose to speak and put forward his proposal for his gift to the town of a monument honoring the valley's original settlers, I knew I was committed to him for life. His voice was mellow and his manner decisive but unassuming. He had a kind of self-confidence that was unlike any I had yet encountered. It seemed born of self-knowledge rather than ignorance. If there was any way possible, I wanted to be just like him when I grew up.

"I just want to do something to show my appreciation for our valley's heritage," Chester said. "This town has been very good to my family, and I'd like to erect a monument that will commemorate our forefathers for future generations."

"How about opening a factory to draw industrial workers? We could use some new blood around here," offered Sam Winston, who was always talking about selling his land to build houses on.

"Not to mention the money they'd spend," added the owner of the general store. I could see we were in for a really artistic discussion.

I raised my hand, stirring up some amusement among the elders for my youthful presumption and some embarrassed harrumphing from my father, along with a warning jab from his elbow, which I paid no mind. When I was called on, I said, "In school, we learned that art is an important part of civilization. A culture is remembered for its art when its people are all dead, but who remembers how much they spent at the general store? I think we should look at Mr. Stewart's design before we say anything more, so at least we'll know what we're discussing."

My father didn't hit me in public, either because he didn't want to make a fool out of himself in front of the whole town or because he didn't know what I was talking about, but he did tell me to hush. "What do you know about this town's needs, boy? Have a little respect," he whispered. The owner of the general store had never been especially nice to me, so I didn't much care what he thought, but he was one of my father's friends—if you can call half a dozen clipped sentences a week any kind of friendship. So I held my tongue.

Chester looked at me gratefully, and before there was any further discussion, he unrolled his drawing of something I couldn't quite figure out. I thought he was holding it upside down. I certainly couldn't see any of the half-naked people my schoolmate's father had warned him about. If I wasn't sure what it was in spite of my good intentions, the others were altogether mystified. Some of them even started to snicker. Nobody said anything for a full three minutes, until Sam Winston said, with a falsely gentle manner that barely hid his contempt, "Can you tell us what that's supposed to be, son?"

Chester looked only mildly insulted, but he didn't drop his good will for an instant. "It's an abstract sculpture," he said. "Nothing is representational—that is, it isn't supposed to look like what it stands for. It's supposed to be symbolic, to suggest the feeling we have for the subject. For example, this section represents the Indians whose land it was before our forefathers arrived and the closeness they had to nature." He pointed to a collection of cones that could have been tepees, with what looked like clusters of arrows sticking out of them. "And this section represents the agriculture of our region," he continued, pointing to a smooth inverted cone, out of which was spilling an assortment of shapes that might have been pumpkins or apples, and some corn, or maybe cucumbers. "And here we have a symbol of Henry Hudson, who first explored this region in his ship the *Half Moon*," he said, pointing at a large semicircle at the bottom. "And of the minutemen who fought in the Revolution," he added, indicating what might have been a row of raised arms or rifles, or maybe just stick-figure torsos of some kind. I have to confess I was as baffled as the others, but at least I didn't join in the general laughter. The discussion was brought to a swift close when the council voted to thank Mr. Stewart very much, but asked if maybe they could have a new fire truck instead. Chester didn't lose his dignity for a moment. He said he'd think about the fire truck, and returned to his seat.

After the meeting was over, I was the first one out. My father was busy talking to some of his cronies, and I stood under the elm tree in front of the church. When Chester passed by, I gave him my brightest smile, and he stuck out his hand and said, "Thanks for the support. I needed a friend. I thought I was doing the town a favor, and they made me feel like Daniel in the lion's den."

"That's how I felt in there, too. But my name really is Daniel—Daniel Blake."

"Oh, so you're John Blake's boy?"

I nodded.

"You seem to be interested in art."

"Well . . . I like pictures. I draw a little, but I'm not very good at it. Not like you. Mostly I read books."

"I read a lot too. Around here that makes us both oddballs. The only book these people read is the Bible, but I bet you've gone further than that. What do you read? No, let me guess. I bet you like Robert Louis Stevenson and Jules Verne and that sort of thing. Those were the writers I loved when I was your age. How old are you anyway?"

I was a little overwhelmed with all the questions, but I was thrilled at his attention and the feeling of not being alone anymore. "I'm fifteen—almost sixteen," I stretched it. "And you're right. I do like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and Jules Verne, too. *The Time*

Machine is one of my favorites. I don't usually talk to anybody about them though, except Miss Binder in the library."

"She's an old friend of mine too," he said. "But I haven't seen her in quite a while. I've been busy. I spend a lot of time down in the city."

"New York City? Wow! I've never been there."

"You'd like it."

"What's it like?"

"It's exciting."

We stopped for a minute, almost out of breath. Then I asked, "Did you do the sculpture in Miss Binder's parlor?"

"The pink marble one? Yes. I'd almost forgotten about that. It was quite a while back. It was nice of you to notice it."

I blushed. "I like it a lot."

"Gee, thanks. You're a good kid. Tell me the truth. Did you like the sketch I did for the monument?"

I was embarrassed, and it took me a minute to answer. "Ayuh . . . well, I guess I really didn't know what it was at first. But sure I liked it—after you explained it, that is."

"Well, that's honest, at least. I guess it takes a little learning to understand these things. It's an acquired taste, like eating snails. But abstract art is all the rage back in the city, and in Europe it's old hat already."

"Do people really eat snails?" I asked.

"Only in the better restaurants." We both laughed. Then he said, "I've got to be going now, Daniel. Thanks again for speaking up in there."

"Any time," I answered. "I hope we meet again soon."

He gave me an amused look and walked off toward his car. I went to look for my father's truck in the parking field and found he had already gone. He'd pulled that trick before, when I'd lingered too long after church saying good-bye to Miss Binder. So I started the long walk home, planning to daydream about Chester to pass the time.

I had only gone a short way up the road when the yellow roadster pulled up alongside me. Chester said, "What's the matter? No ride home? You live out at Orphean Hill, don't you? Hop in. I'm going that way anyhow."

I couldn't get into that car fast enough, but I was careful not to rip the handle off the door. I didn't want to damage anything. It was the most elegant car I'd ever seen, and I felt like a princess sitting next to her prince in a royal coach.

"Gee, this is a swell car," I offered. Then I felt like a fool. "I bet you're tired of hearing stuff like that. Your city friends must be much more interesting."

"Just be yourself, Daniel. You're doing fine," he said graciously.

"What kind of people live in New York City?" I inquired, trying my best to relax.

“All kinds. That’s what’s so great about it. There are rich and poor, colored and white, straight business types and gay bohemians . . .”

“What’s a bohemian?” I asked. I didn’t pick up on the “gay.” It just meant “cheerful” to me then.

“Oh, somebody who’s an individualist, usually an artistic type. They wear unusual clothes and think unusual thoughts.”

“Are you a bohemian? I know you’re artistic.”

“Well, maybe in a minor sort of way. I’m pretty much an individual. But most bohemians don’t have as much money as I do. When you’re well-heeled and act strange, they call you eccentric instead of bohemian. It gets rather complicated. But who cares what they call you, as long as you’re having a good time?”

That was a wonderful philosophy, I thought, but maybe only the rich could afford to adopt it. “I’d like to be a bohemian,” I said. “I sure get bored around here. Everybody’s so much the same as everybody else. Except me. I’m different.”

“How so?”

“I’m not sure if I can say. Nobody else around here likes to sit alone in the cemetery and read books the way I do. All of the other guys at school are interested in baseball, and they can’t wait to start dating. I don’t think I’m going to date anybody. The girls at school are so boring. I’d rather be by myself.”

“You’d rather not date anybody at all? Or you’d rather not date the people you’re supposed to date?”

“Ayuh, that’s it. But I don’t know who I do want to date. Well, maybe I do, but . . .”

“But what?”

“I don’t know, exactly.”

“I won’t push you,” he said gently, “but I have a feeling I know what you’re talking about. I was just as confused as you are when I was your age. I wanted to be with my best friend, Albert, but Albert wanted to be with his girlfriend, Betty, and I didn’t have a girlfriend. Or want one. I wanted Albert.”

“That’s something like it,” I said. “But I don’t have any best friend.” I was pretty scared. I had never talked to anybody about this before. But he had as much as confessed to me, and if I couldn’t talk to him, then whom could I talk to?

As if he could read my mind, he said, “You can talk to Miss Binder about this, you know.”

“Oh? What does she know? I mean, she’s nice and all that, but, well, she’s a spinster. What does she know about love?”

“So it’s love we’re talking about, eh?”

I’m sure I blushed the color of a ripe McIntosh. I couldn’t answer.

“Do you trust me, Daniel?”

I nodded.

“Go to Miss Binder. She’s a smart old bird. She knows more than you think. And maybe we’ll have another chance to talk, too. Just remember one thing, Danny. You’re not as alone as you think.”

We were pulling into the yard in front of our house at that point, and my father was standing there next to his truck with his usual disapproving expression. He had hoped the long walk home would be a good lesson for me, and instead here I was being delivered in a grand chariot.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Blake,” Chester said, almost jauntily. “You forgot someone back at the church, so I thought I’d deliver him.”

“Much obliged,” my father said without a trace of gratitude. I knew my father just hated being obligated to people, especially rich young upstarts in fancy yellow cars, but I didn’t care what he thought. I was beaming with love, and my protector was beside me. Any civilized father would have invited Chester in for a glass of apple juice, but I didn’t expect civility. I was just relieved that there were no open insults.

Once Chester had gone, my father gave me one of his lectures about knowing my place and not burdening others. But I only listened with half an ear. I was too busy trying to memorize the shape of Chester’s knuckles when his hand had gripped the steering wheel. I didn’t want to forget a single thing. I had just experienced the most exciting half hour of my life.

From then on I had something to live for. I thought of Chester day and night. I doodled his name in my notebook in algebra class instead of listening to the teacher, and I flunked a test in solving equations. I looked longingly out of the school bus window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the yellow roadster. I mooned over the lyrics from popular songs. At least I knew I had the ability to love someone, I consoled myself. But he didn’t know it. How could I tell him? No movie heroine suffered more than I did. No character in the most romantic tale was more in love. I was Juliet, Guinevere, Lois Lane—no, make that Jimmy Olsen. I’d always thought he had a crush on Superman. I pictured Chester flying around in tight blue underwear, with his red cape flowing behind him and me cradled in his arms. Within days I knew I was a major case, and I thought I’d burst if I didn’t have somebody to talk to.

I went to see Miss Binder at the start of the next week. It only took half an hour of hemming and hawing before I came out with the simple truth.

“I think I’m in love.”

“That’s nice, Daniel. I’m happy for you.”

“But I think I’m in love with . . . a man.”

“I hope he’s someone nice,” she said, without averting her gaze.

“You mean you’re not surprised? You don’t think it’s disgusting or anything?”

“No to both questions. Let’s just say I have a special instinct for these matters. I was pretty sure about you, but it’s always better to let people discover such things for themselves. Who’s the lucky young man?”

“He says he’s a friend of yours—Chester Stewart, the one who did the pink sculpture in your parlor.”

“I should have guessed. Chester is a darling boy, but isn’t he a good deal older than you?”

“Miss Binder, if I’m in love with someone who’s the wrong sex, what’s the difference if he’s the wrong age too?”

“Get that word ‘wrong’ out of your mind, Daniel. There is nothing wrong with being in love—ever. It’s just that Chester is so worldly. He goes to the city and knows sophisticated people. That could create problems for you.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. I don’t know how to tell him about my feelings. What could he find interesting in somebody like me? He might laugh or something.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t do that, Daniel. And if he did, then he wouldn’t be deserving of your love in the first place. Why don’t you do a favor for both of you and break the news to him gently? Give him some time. I know you’re impatient. Young lovers always are. But if there’s really something there, a little time won’t hurt it. It might even help.”

“I guess you’re right. You really know a lot, Miss Binder. I didn’t think you’d understand so much about love. I mean, without a man of your own . . . Oh God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be unkind, especially after you’ve been so nice to me.”

“It’s all right, Daniel. You didn’t mean any disrespect. But let’s not talk about me. Let’s just say I have my ways of knowing. I am a librarian, you know. Speaking of which, there’s a book I’ve been saving for you, and I couldn’t imagine a more appropriate time to give it to you.”

She went upstairs and came back with a book in her hand. She held it as she held all books, with a special reverence and care that I admired her for. It was a dark green volume, whose spine was tooled in gold leaf in an ornate art nouveau design scrolled around its title. *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman.

“This is a very special book,” she said. “It’s one I bought for you myself. It was going to be your grade school graduation present, but when the time came, I decided you weren’t ready yet, and I was waiting for your high school graduation. After what you told me today, I think you’re ready now. I know you haven’t read much poetry yet, but I think you’ll like this because it speaks so directly. I’m not going to tell you which poems to read. Why don’t you just skim through it and decide for yourself what parts you like best?”

I opened it gingerly, trying to show as much respect in handling it as Miss Binder had. The title page was simple but impressively lettered, and it was dated 1892. The frontispiece opposite it showed a photograph of a wise-

looking man with a flowing white beard. His eyes captured mine immediately. I couldn't tell from the black-and-white picture if they were gray or blue, but they had a special light that made them seem alive, as if he were there with me in the room, regardless of who I was or when I lived, as if he were my friend and knew all my secrets and didn't mind them at all.

"Wow," I said. "Is this the man who wrote 'O Captain! My Captain!'"

"Ayuh," answered Miss Binder. "But I would call that the least of his accomplishments. Why don't you read something?"

I flipped the pages and sampled a line or two from several poems, but when I came to these lines, I read further, reciting aloud.

"We two boys together clinging,
One the other never leaving,
Up and down the roads going, North and South excursions
making,
Power enjoying, elbows stretching, fingers clutching,
Arm'd and fearless, eating, drinking, sleeping, loving,
No law less than ourselves owning . . ."

And I fell in love for the second time that week.

I carried *Leaves of Grass* with me wherever I went after that. In fact, I still have the same volume. During my boyhood it was always in my schoolbag or under my arm. I read it in bits and snatches, a poem from this section and a poem from that. I found poems about love and war and death and time and the universe. Some of the lines seemed especially beautiful, even if there were parts I couldn't yet understand. Do you know how it is when you come upon something that just rings true, as if you were reading what you've thought yourself but haven't yet put into words? Maybe it was just Whitman's poetic genius, but he seemed to understand the world from the same vantage point I did. He and I were soul mates of some kind. What was important to him was important to me. We asked the same questions, only he had some of the answers. Maybe I would have arrived at the same ideas myself without his help, but I'll never know that. I trusted Walt's wisdom right from the beginning.

I loved to read *Leaves of Grass* out by Martha's stone, and sometimes I would stop reading in order to look at the grass growing all around me and speculate on the new meanings with which Walt had endowed it for me:

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any
more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful
green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord . . .

Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we
may see and remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child . . .

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them . . .

When a particularly loving passage made me think about Chester, I would get an erection and stop reading to masturbate, which was my other favorite activity, and I would feel secretly clean and good.

On rainy days, I carried the book around the house with me, reading in one corner or another, wherever the light was best. One day my father came out of his room unexpectedly to question Mrs. Warner about some household expenses. I scarcely bothered to look up, not wanting to be interrupted.

“What’s that, boy? You still readin’ them fairy books? You’re gettin’ too old for that. Give it here.”

“This is not a children’s book. It’s poetry, and it’s none of your business.”

He slapped my face sharply. “Keep a civil tongue in your head when you talk to me, boy. That’s one of the Commandments.” He snatched the book from my grasp.

I wanted to cry, more in frustration than in pain, but I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. So, ignoring the wet weather, I went out to sit near Martha’s stone, but by then I was more sad than indignant. The cool drizzle calmed me. I imagined the ghost of Martha putting her wraith’s arms around me in comfort, and I listened as hard as I could to the souging wind for some sound of encouragement. But of course I was alone.

When I returned to the house, my father was waiting for me. “You know that this is the Devil’s book, don’t you?” he asked.

“No, I thought it was Miss Binder’s. She gave it to me.”

“Think you’ve got a right to be sassy, eh? You and your librarian and her so-called friend, too. Well we’ll see about that. You all have some answerin’ to do. Do you know what it says in here? Listen to this: ‘I am for those who believe in loose delights—I share the midnight orgies of young men.’ This book is full of smut! It’s unnatural! It’s a perversion of nature!”

He ranted on for much of the evening, and I sat there and put up with it—not because I wanted to hear what he had to say, but because I didn’t want to let that book out of my sight. The old fool might have tried to burn it. Finally, when he had spent his wrath for the day and fallen asleep, I sneaked into his room and took the book from his dresser where he had left

it, and I hid it carefully away with my birth certificate in the attic, where he would never think to look.

Mrs. Warner couldn't help but hear all the commotion, and she invited me into the kitchen for a cup of hot cider to calm me down. "You know I don't like to mix in your affairs, Daniel. I don't say much, but I do know what's going on around here. I'd have to be blind not to. If you're not careful with yourself, something terrible's going to happen. We all have desires that must be tamed. We're all sinners. God punished me for my sins. That's why I fear Him now, and it's not too late for you to do the same. Don't give in to the Devil, Daniel. That book is just a trap to lead you to hell. Don't you want to spend eternity with Jesus? You don't have to give in to temptation. You can follow the right road. It doesn't matter what you think you are. It matters what you do. Beat back those awful desires, and you'll be a better person for it. Then God will give you His love instead of His wrath. You know I'm right, Daniel. Now kneel here with me and pray. Come on."

That was the most Mrs. Warner had said to me at one time, and I was impressed with her concern, if not with her message. I was too embarrassed to dispute the issue with her, so I knelt down beside her while she began to pray.

"Oh God, help this boy to see Your true will. Make his desires Your desires. Remove this awful temptation from his path and make him righteous in Your name, so he can fulfill his duties in this, Your world, as a man and a father. Close his eyes to evil books and his ears to evil people . . ."

I couldn't take any more. She meant well, but I didn't want to hear the people I loved called evil. I didn't want to end up like her, with my head bowed and my mouth shut and fear in my eyes. If there were problems in my path, I'd face them, but at least it would still be my own chosen path and not someone else's. I stood up and walked out and left her kneeling there. The pitiful sound of her praying followed me up the stairs.

I fell asleep almost immediately, but a short while later I awoke with a start from a vivid nightmare:

I could hear Mrs. Warner's footsteps dragging up the stairs. She was moving slowly, as if she were uncertain of herself. She stood in the doorway of my room, watching me as I lay on my bed, waiting. There was a strange electricity between us. She slowly crossed the floor and stood beside the bed. Then she sat down beside me and said, "Daniel, you know what God wants, don't you?"

I remained silent.

"God wants me to save you. To show you the way."

I didn't move an inch.

"You know that Jesus loves you, don't you?"

I didn't respond. She put the palm of her left hand gently to my cheek. With her right hand she clasped mine and brought it to her bosom, her face raised and her eyes tightly

closed, as if she were in silent communion with God. I imagined my hand slipping inside her dress and past her undergarments. I imagined how her small soft breast would feel in my hand, its rigid nipple pressed against my palm.

I imagined her leaning toward me to kiss me, even though she hadn't moved.

Suddenly I pulled my hand from her bodice. "You can't make me do it!" I screamed. "You'll never make me be what you want!" I sprang from the bed and ran through the door and downstairs. I didn't stop until I had reached Martha's stone.

That's when I woke up, shuddering. It took another hour before I could fall asleep again.

From then on, for as long as I lived in that house, I had the feeling that Mrs. Warner was watching me from a careful distance and waiting for some violent doom to descend upon me. But she never mentioned the subject again.

The next morning was Sunday, and I hoped that my father would forget about Walt Whitman in the bustle of getting ready for church. But as soon as he was awake, he came to my room and said, "Where is the book?"

I swallowed my fear and stared at him with a level gaze and didn't answer. "Where is it?" he repeated. "Remember, 'Thou shalt not steal.'"

If there was a thief in the room, it certainly wasn't me, but I remained silent.

"I see you have more than one lesson to learn," he said grimly, and he left me in my room, locking the door behind him. I did without breakfast that morning.

When he and Mrs. Warner were ready to leave for church, he came and unlocked the door. "Get in the truck," he said.

He didn't mention the missing book. Not a word passed between us as we rode to town. Only at the end of the service did I know the depth of his rage. We were recovering from Reverend Friendly's droning dissertation on "Purity of Thought," and we had all seated ourselves after caterwauling our way through "He Walks With Me" when the good minister announced, among other community excitements, that Miss Binder was planning a library exhibit of books on the Bible.

As was customary, all eyes turned to whichever member of the congregation was mentioned by name. The Misses Binder and Standish sat side by side, looking like bookends. Just as they shopped together and made visits together, they always attended church together. Their attendance was frequent, but slightly irregular. I'd say they missed not one more Sunday morning than decency allowed.

Miss Binder was nodding and smiling politely, like the newsreels I had seen of Queen Mary on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, until my father jumped to his feet and started yelling.

"That woman's got no right even touching our Bible, let alone showing it to our children! She does the Devil's work! She gave my boy a book full

of unnatural lusts and perversions! Self-abuse! Men together with men! Sex! It's disgusting! And that's not all. She's one of 'em herself, her and her schoolmarm friend over there. You all know it. You just won't say it. But now their vice is reachin' our young. They aren't friends or house mates. They aren't spinsters either. They're lovers! Female sodomites! Spawn of the Devil! And they're after my boy! They're tryin' to turn him into some kind of sissy, and I won't let them!"

I wanted to crawl under the pew with shame. Miss Standish's pince-nez fell off immediately. But this was the first time I'd ever seen her fail to catch it. It swung wildly on its ribbon as she rose to her feet. "You have no right..." she sputtered. But her courage failed her, and the tyrant of the schoolroom crumpled softly into her seat.

Miss Binder took over. Her pince-nez had not fallen off. "It's all right, Myra," she said. "Mr. Blake, this is not the first time that you have launched such a crusade. Are you planning to make a career of it?" She amazed me. Her sweet gentility was backed up by a strength I hadn't suspected in her. "As for the book I gave your son, it is widely known to be America's finest book of poems. Thank God this country is broader than your mind."

But my father wasn't about to be intimidated. "Your kind should be hounded out of this country! You aren't a fit woman to be sittin' in this church! And the same goes for your partner in sin. She's not the kind of person we want schoolin' our children. God alone knows what terrible things she's taught them!"

Reverend Friendly interrupted from the height of his pulpit. "You've said your piece, John, and I'm sure we all want to consider it carefully. If we act in haste, we will surely repent at leisure. Services are over now, and I think it's time for everyone to be going. This is not an appropriate subject to discuss in the house of God." He had abandoned his usual droning and sounded tense. "Enjoy your Sunday dinners, everybody, and between now and next Sunday, think on what Our Lord said about casting the first stone."

The crowd filed out silently, but the air was thick with tension. Most people probably wanted to get their children out of earshot before discussing such a horrible topic. Few lingered to see Miss Binder and Miss Standish walk out the front door—side by side, their arms linked in mutual support, their chins held high, and their eyes fixed straight ahead. I went out after them and followed them toward their house, ignoring the sound of my father's voice calling my name.

I walked some paces behind them, afraid to catch up to them because I could hear that Miss Standish was crying, and I knew she wouldn't like me to see that. Finally, a few yards away from their small front porch, I cleared my throat as loudly as I could. They both squared their shoulders suddenly, as if to deflect a blow from behind. When they turned, I could see Miss Standish's pince-nez still dangling from the end of its ribbon. Otherwise,

except for her reddened eyes, to all outward appearances she had regained her composure.

“I just wanted to apologize for what my father said back there. I didn’t want you to think I was on his side. I don’t care if you are what he said. I wouldn’t betray you. I love you both.”

Miss Binder answered, “We know that, Daniel. We know who you are. It’s not your fault, and you mustn’t worry about it. We are quite capable of defending ourselves. You have enough worries of your own, living with someone as cruel and obsessed as your father.”

“I’ll be okay,” I said, not at all sure that I would. “Miss Binder, I just wanted to tell you I thought you were wonderful back there. But what did you mean when you said that this wasn’t the first time my father had done such a thing?”

“I’m sorry, Daniel, but I am not at liberty to answer that. Why don’t you ask your father?”

“Fat chance he’d ever tell me anything,” I said. “Besides, I don’t think I ever want to talk to him again.”

“You don’t mean that,” said Miss Standish. “Whatever his opinions are, he’s still your father. You need each other.” She sounded much softer than I had ever heard her in the classroom, or even in her own parlor. “You’d better go home now, Daniel. We have a lot of plans to make.”

“Yes, Miss Standish,” I said, falling back into my grade school pupil’s voice. “But one last thing, Miss Binder: I still have the book. I won’t let him have it. I wanted you to know that.”

“I’m glad, Daniel. You must cherish it. You’ll need it for comfort.” She sounded weary.

“Maybe Reverend Friendly will be on your side. I’m sure he can help you!” I hated to leave them in such despair.

“No, Daniel, I don’t think so. He’s no crusader. He has his own position to consider. He’s the one who asked me to keep the book off the open shelf. But don’t you worry. We’ll manage just fine.”

“Isn’t there something I can do?”

“Thank you, no. You’ve already done enough by coming here.”

“Good luck, then,” I said. “Let me know if there’s some way I can help.”

I walked off into the sunny afternoon, not sure where I was going until I was all the way past the other side of town and the sun was beginning to set. Then I realized that Chester’s house was in that part of the valley, and I was determined to find it.