

REVIEWS

Arnie Kantrowitz was a gift to gay letters: teacher, scholar, autobiographer, activist. He is sorely missed. But he also left behind this wonderful novel. *Song of Myself* is not autobiographical fiction, but a spiritual American history where Arnie gave his love of Walt Whitman to a fictional gay Everyman of a different generation and wider experience. Lively, sexy, dramatic and accessible, this is popular fiction at its best."

– **Christopher Bram, author, *Father of Frankenstein* and *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America***

Creative inhibitions, the professional demands of teaching, and eventually, failing health, all prevented Arnie Kantrowitz from publishing his only novel, *Song of Myself*, in his lifetime. But it would be a mistake to dismiss this as a mere archival curiosity. *Song of Myself* is an entertaining and enlightening novel inspired by Walt Whitman's spiritual, literary, and political legacies, written by a man who was himself a leader in the gay liberation struggle, and a Whitman scholar. *Song of Myself*, like the poem it is named after, is a celebration of life in all of its exhilaration, pleasure, and confusion. Daniel Dell Blake is a character who lives against the backdrop of twentieth-century America, through wars and political upheaval, through the modern gay rights movement, through tragic losses from AIDS, and survival in its aftermath. Through it all, Whitman's poetry is a constant presence in Daniel's life, as it was in Kantrowitz's own life, and the lives of many queer folks who came to see Whitman as a spiritual icon. This book is an important document of post-Stonewall literary history, and a delightful blend of creative and critical texts. Arnie Kantrowitz has left all Whitman lovers a gift that should be enjoyed and celebrated.

– **Lavelle Porter, Distinguished Lecturer, Macaulay Honors College, CUNY, author of *The Blackademic Life: Academic Fiction, Higher Education, and the Black Intellectual*.**

Arnie Kantrowitz made history with his activism and his writing and teaching. He also made knowing and writing our history possible. There's a direct line from the concerns of his activism, his teaching and his writing — the achievement of *Under the Rainbow* and his re-interpretation and resurrection of a literary history that might otherwise have continued unseen — to the issues we face today. He posthumously points the way to confronting our present—and future--challenges.

– **Bill Goldstein, founding editor of the *New York Times* Books website; author, *The World Broke in Two: Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, and the Year that Changed Literature***

I'm always fascinated when novelists do history, vividly imagining the life of their characters through time and social upheaval. So I'm delighted to recommend Kantrowitz's novel. As a leader of New York's Gay Activists Alliance, Arnie inspired me to quit the closet, and now Arnie inspires me again. Thanks, Arnie!

– Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History, The Daring Life and Dangerous Times of Eve Adams*

What an unexpected gift Arnie Kantrowitz left us in *Song of Myself*. Who knew that he had one more story to tell—and an epic one at that? In his protagonist Dell Blake, Arnie has created an Everyman whose life embodies a vast swath of 20th-century gay America. It's all here: small-town attacks during the Great Depression, closeted soldiering during World War II, the brutal homophobia of the McCarthy era, the stirrings of Mattachine activism, the glorious liberation of Stonewall, the fathomless devastations of AIDS. And it's all set to the expansive twang of Walt Whitman, the first audibly gay American poet. Only a scholar of Arnie's caliber could bring so much history to life. Only a mensch of Arnie's compassion could make it all so moving.

– Michael Schiavi, Ph.D., author of *Celluloid Activist: The Life and Times of Vito Russo*

On the journey to himself, Kantrowitz's lovable but conflicted Ulysses sails a picaresque odyssey across the shifting seas of queer America from World War II to AIDS. Dan Blake, an aspiring poet, boasts the same qualities as this novel: dry wit, a smartass sense of humor, and a gift for sympathetic yet bemused observation rendered in vivid, aphoristic language. His inner life is as colorful as his real-world misadventures, from surviving a Japanese POW camp to becoming a sex slave. His one comfort is Walt Whitman, whose poetry and persona stimulate both his sometimes mystical imagination and his randy groin. Believing that Walt proves "there is some mysterious connection between loving men and creating poems," Dan sleeps his way around the globe until he understands and accepts the destination he didn't know he was heading for.

– James M. Saslow, Professor emeritus, City University of New York, author of *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society*, *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Annotated Translation*, and *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts*

With Arnie's death many of us wondered what would become of the fictional memoir he'd left behind but not published. Thanks to Larry Mass's devotion, the memoir has been saved and is now published. It will, I feel sure, take its rightful place as both an unusual account of growing up gay in the pre-Stonewall years, as well as a unique rendering of the early years of the LGBTQ+ movement. Congratulations to all concerned!

– Martin Duberman, Professor Emeritus of History, Lehman College, Founder, Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at CUNY

Arnie Kantrowitz, who wrote the finest memoir of the early gay liberation movement, *Under the Rainbow*, has given us in *Song of Myself* a thoroughly delightful picaresque novel. He presents us with Daniel Dell Blake, a gay boy raised in an apple orchard, who travels to New York City to hobnob with the bohemian elite, lands in a Japanese prison camp during World War II, marries, separates, briefly attends college as a kept boy, works cleaning up in a bordello, is sent to prison on sodomy charges, assists an antiques dealer—episode after episode in classic picaresque style, including à la *Tom Jones*, the possibility of incest. In so doing the innocent becomes a rascal who never loses his moral or aesthetic sense. On the way we meet dozens of fascinating characters—Chester, the sculptor; Willard, the professor; Edwin, the antiques dealer; Gordon, the doctor; Louie, the hairdresser and prison mate—in travels that take us coast to coast and from the 1930s through the 1990s. Beautifully counterpointed against this tale is Dell's obsession with Walt Whitman, which brilliantly informs the action. *Song of Myself* could well have been granted another Whitman title, "Song of the Open Road," because of its openness of spirit and of form.

– **David Bergman, Professor Emeritus, Towson University, author of *The Violet Hour: The Violet Quill and the Making of Gay Culture***

Activist, teacher, memoirist, and now novelist, Arnie Kantrowitz's manifold gifts to his beloved community of "manly companions" are now brought to a moving conclusion with his posthumous novel *Song of Myself*. Devotion is the theme; devotion to truth, to love, to a life dedicated to absorbing the lessons of his beloved poet Walt Whitman, devotion to devotion itself. *Song of Myself* can show you how to save your life with literature.

– **Steve Turtell, writer, poet, artist, is currently at work on *Fifty Jobs in Fifty Years*, and *Peter Hujar: Invisible Master***

Song of Myself is a witness's tale to our gay history. One that is compelling and filled with unheard voices. As Dan wanders this county and lives through the depression, World War II, and the AIDS epidemic, he has Whitman as his guide and companion. Kantrowitz treats us to an honest portrayal of these two distinct beings in all their evolving complexities. A colorful and welcomed read.

– **Victor Bumbalo, author, playwright, founder and president of the Robert Chesley/Victor Bumbalo Foundation**

Song of Myself is superb *Bildungsroman* that captures the joys and angsts of coming out in the past century, a past that's suddenly becoming too relevant to those of us feeling our oats today. The frankness of the prose, the lyricism of the emotions, and the artistry of the totality, make us mourn Kantrowitz's absence even more than many of us already have. This stalwart LGBTQI activist, who penned the very first post-gay-lib autobiography, *Under the Rainbow*, is hopefully now sitting high above us upon his very own cloud, hobnobbing with his inspiration, Mr. Whitman, comparing beards and their literary accomplishments.

– **Brandon Judell, Lecturer at the City College of New York Dept. of Theatre and Speech**

Arnie Kantrowitz's posthumous novel is a necessary gift for all lovers of gay literature and devotees of the work of Walt Whitman. Beginning at the start of the 20th century and spanning much of America, *Song of Myself* is about the liberation of people who survived the great risk of coming out of the closet and many who didn't. It ends decades later when gay people can live in what we can call the beginning of a queer nation. Whitman is the real hero of this novel who Kantrowitz credits with being the poet who opened the gates of this promise. May this book become a classic of gay studies. Open it and be seduced.

**– Jaime Manrique, Distinguished Lecturer (City College of New York),
Recipient of the Bill Whitehead Award for Lifetime Achievement (2019)**

There's been an eerie void in the LGBTQ community since Arnie Kantrowitz' voice was silenced by Covid in 2022. Yet the compelling voice that graced his classic memoir *Under the Rainbow: Growing Up Gay* returned with renewed energy in his posthumously published novel, *Song of Myself: A Novel*.

The book's protagonist, Daniel Dell Blake, sets out from his childhood home, rural upstate New York, in search of a place where he could safely live and love as a gay man in a homophobic world. But before he reaches home, he must endure the episodic highs and lows of a transformative journey. His only constant companion is a copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* that had been gifted to him as a child by an intuitive librarian. Throughout his long journey, it will be Whitman's poetic celebration of his homoeroticism that serves as Daniel's north star.

Kantrowitz, who has been credited with introducing gay literature into the academic curriculum at City University of New York, and who early on established the gay self-identity in Whitman's poetry, provides the reader with a view of what life was like for LGBTQ people during the dark days when secrecy was a necessary survival tool in a homophobic world. The story travels through a time period of over fifty years: making stops in Greenwich Village with its pre-war Bohemian culture, the horrors of World War II, the suffocating prejudices of the 1950s, into the pulse of psychedelic New York City, where Daniel resides at the Chelsea Hotel, to witnessing up close the Stonewall riots and the early days of gay liberation, and then painfully through the tragic losses of the AIDS crisis. But whatever challenges Daniel encounters, Whitman's voice continues to speak to his soul, especially concerning the importance of celebrating the beauty of one's sexuality.

A poet himself--and with his expert knowledge of Whitman's poetry--Kantrowitz has crafted a work of high art. His novel is essential reading for anyone who appreciates a memorable journey to self-realization courageously taken by an unflappable traveler.

**– Maryann Feola, Professor Emerita, The City University of New York,
author, *Geography of Shame: A Fictionalized Memoir***

SONG OF
MYSELF

A Novel

Arnie Kantrowitz

Copyright © 2024 Estate of Arnold Kantrowitz

Published by Sentinel Voices

SENTINEL



VOICES

ISBN: 978-1629672700

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024905910

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the Estate of Arnold Kantrowitz, except in the case of a reviewer, who may quote brief passages embodied in critical articles or in a review.

Trademarked names may appear throughout this book. Rather than use a trademark symbol with every occurrence of a trademarked name, names are used in an editorial fashion, with no intention of infringement of the respective owner's trademark.

The information in this book is distributed on an “as is” basis, without warranty. Although every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this work, neither the Estate of Arnold Kantrowitz nor the publisher shall have any liability to any person or entity with respect to any loss or damage caused or alleged to be caused directly or indirectly by the information contained in this book.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design: Tatiana Fernandez

Interior Layout: Brian Schwartz

v24-0805



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for background information they provided through conversations, books, articles, and research notes: Allan Berube, John D'Emilio, Bruce Eves, Cathy Kent Fein, Randy Forrester, Jim Foster, Brad Gooch, Aoki Hirotsugu, Jonathan Ned Katz, Donald Knutson, Lawrence Mass, M.D., Ron Petty, John Preston, Cecil Rees, Marc Rubin, Vito Russo, Henry A. Sauerwein, Charley Shively, and Tom Steele.

Partial support for this project was made by a Creative Incentive Award from the Professional Staff Congress-City University of New York, and by a grant from the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation of New Mexico, Henry A. Sauerwein, Director.

In memory of my parents
Jean Zabarsky Kantrowitz Michaels
1924-1971
Morris Kantrowitz
1910-1986

In memory of
Irene Kask Pink
1940-1988

In memory of
All my friends who died of AIDS

For Larry Mass
with love

*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”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	15
EDITOR'S NOTE	19
PROLOGUE	21
PART I - DANIEL DELL BLAKE	23
PART II - DAN BLAKE	95
PART III - DANNY BLAKE	141
PART IV - DELL BLAKE	197
PART V - DELLA BLAKE	287
PART VI - D. D. BLAKE	357
PART VII - DANIEL DELL BLAKE	419
EPILOGUE	443

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.¹

New York City
January 26, 2024

¹ This introduction is adapted from "Walt Whitman, Arnie Kantrowitz and Us" by Lawrence D. Mass, on SentinelVoices.com

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.

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

– Song of Myself –

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 spurting 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.