

# The Children

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To those who are the most unfortunate  
victims of race hatred--the children,  
in the hope that they will grow up in  
a cleaner and better world.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

IT WAS TWELVE YEARS AGO THAT I FINISHED WRITING *The Children*. And, looking back, it seems to me that writing it was the most difficult literary task I had ever attempted, both in a physical and in a creative sense.

At the time, I was working twelve to fourteen hours a day in a factory in downtown New York. I followed the storybook maxim of the writer who would write, come what may, come heaven or hell. Rising with the dawn, I drank two or three cups of strong coffee; and I managed to write a little, a page or two, each day. It wasn't a pleasant process, or one that I consider particularly helpful to the creative life. My wages at that time--and you will remember that those were very bad times--were eleven dollars a week; my health was not good. I was always tired--I always dreamed of the two or three extra hours of sleep which I had to deny myself or stop writing. And when I finished, when I finally wrote the last page of a book that had come out of my very gut, I realized that it was like nothing else that I had ever read, and would therefore probably be consigned to a desk drawer forever. In the two years that followed, I wrote almost nothing at all.

In the beginning, I rejected the manuscript myself. I put it away for three months and did absolutely nothing with it. Then I read in the papers that Whit Burnett, who was editor of Story magazine, was deeply interested in the short novel, and I left the book at his office. A week later, it became a discovery, and I was invited down to Story magazine to be told what a wonderful young talent I was--and to participate in the general excitement. This was one of their finds--as was most carefully explained to me--one of the reasons why their little magazine justified its existence. Of course, it was very long for a magazine, 45,000 words, and they would not think of cutting any of it, so they had to investigate the possibility of a special type of word-spacing, something that would permit almost twice the usual word-length on a page. The expense this involved was very considerable for a magazine like Story, and therefore they could not pay a great deal for it.

"How much?" I asked them.

"Fifty dollars," they said.

I turned this over in my mind. On a word basis, it was somewhat more than a tenth of a cent per

word, a remarkable record for literary payment; but if I computed the hours I had spent on it during the past year, a thousand hours at the very least, I arrived at the magnificent wage of five cents an hour. I arrived at an estimate of what it was worth to break your heart and your head because you thought that the literary art was the proudest and the most worthy that man had learned. Then and there, I arrived at a decision--to write no more, to dig ditches, to operate a machine, to ride the freights, but to write no more.

Well, I didn't keep to that decision, and I managed to get *Story* to raise its price to one hundred dollars. But I never again wrote for one of the little magazines. I don't blame Whit Burnett for that condition; his was an unending struggle to keep alive the one outlet a sincere writer then had, and his was also a most considerable contribution to the literature of the 'thirties. But I did look with some new degree of understanding at a society that can offer the artist only poverty, hopelessness, and an occasional crumb of sustenance--a society that drives him to prostitution as certainly as it drives the poor women who walk the streets. I remember, some years later, discussing this with Stuart Rose, who was then an editor of *The Ladies' Home Journal*. I no longer had to work in a factory, because Mr. Rose was buying most of the stories I wrote, and he was paying me six hundred dollars apiece for them. They were not good stories; they were not stories I was proud of then, and I would be less proud of them in the future, but they represented mountains of hamburger and steak and bread and butter. Mr. Rose said to me, one day, when I was lunching with him in Philadelphia:

"You know, I never read anything like *The Children*. It was a poem. It moved me tremendously." He thought I should write more things like that, and he couldn't understand why I disagreed with him.

*The Children* appeared in the March, 1937, issue of *Story* magazine. James J. Fee, Police Inspector of Lynn, Massachusetts, read his first copy of *Story* and decided that *The Children* was "the rottenest thing I ever read!" The two copies that usually went to Lynn were promptly seized. The next day, it was banned in Waterbury, Connecticut, and six hundred orders from that town promptly came in to *Story*. The ban spread over New England, which has been sensitive about such matters ever since Hawthorne was threatened with jail, whipping, and exile because he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*. This was the first time in six years that *Story* had been banned, and it resulted in one of the largest press runs the magazine had ever known.

Since that time, for one reason or another, book publication has been put off. During the war years, I felt that no piece of writing was of any great import unless it contributed something or other to the struggle we were waging for our very existence, and immediately after the war I had another book that I wished to have published first. So now, at long last, I am seeing *The Children* in book form. It is almost exactly as I wrote it. Only the most minor editorial changes have been made.

I have no apologies to make for *The Children*. When I picked it up, a few months before this writing, I read it for the first time in a full decade. It was like reading the work of a stranger, and I could bring to it that relationship a writer almost never has with his own work--that of complete objectivity. Even the various incidents in the tale had been forgotten. I reacted as a reader does, sometimes with pleasure, sometimes with disappointment, but always with incredulous interest that so pure and naive a sense of horror could be woven and sustained. Twelve years ago, I was close enough to childhood to remember the moods, the incidents, and the emotions described; today, as I approach my middle thirties, the curtain has already dropped, and there is no way back. The child's world is his, and it is barred to the adult. If the story told here is successful, it is mainly because the child's point of view has been sustained.

When I wrote it, I wrote out of bitterness and hate for what our society does to children; nor do I think that situation has appreciably bettered itself. Racism--and the murderous lesser isms it breeds--is the curse and cancer of modern America; it is a radio-active effusion that penetrates to every level of our society, and unless we destroy it, as surely as the earth exists, it will destroy us.

I do not think I could write of the sickness of race-hatred today in terms anywhere like these. Too

much has happened in the world since 1934, and too much has changed. In 1934, there was one year of Hitlerism, and we still believed those who said Hitler would not last a thousand days. Today, fifty million dead attest the hell that fascism can produce. The writer, today, has a responsibility he cannot ignore, and if I wrote about these matters today, I would have to examine far more completely the source which these children reflect.

And finally, there is the slum, the jelly on which the germ is bred. If anything, twelve years have given us more and worse slums. If this small tale does anything to help replace them with decent housing, it will be well worth the printing.

## The Children

### ONE

UP THE STREET, SLOWLY, OLLIE SWAGGERED, HIS HEAD cocked, his hands in pockets bulging with the immies he had won. Because he knew he would win again; he knew he could go on winning until there wasn't another immie left in the world. He selected a round beautiful red glassy, and tossed it away. That was the way Ollie felt.

The world was full of hot sunlight and red brick walls, and the world, stretching from avenue to avenue, was held in by the walls. Maybe that was why Ollie loomed so big, because the world was so small. Big and small, big and small; but, until something larger came, Ollie was king. He knew he was king, and he attempted to walk like a king, brushing back his long yellow hair from his eyes, throwing back his head. Still, it was an easy world to be king of now, dozing and hot, and all sort of vague. Ollie was conscious of that vagueness that came in the middle of the summertime; it made him too lazy, even, to fight. It was easy to be king, and, if nobody wanted to fight, you didn't want to fight yourself. What then?

He rattled his immies, and then he noticed a little Jew sitting on the curb. Dimly, as a king, he knew that the little Jew's name was Ishky.

"Hey, yuh stinkin' kike!" Ollie yelled good-naturedly.

"Hey, Ollie."

"Wanna fight?"

"Naw, Ollie."

"Wanna shoot immies? Aincha got none?"

"Yer a shark."

"G'wan, I ain'."

"Y'are."

"Awright, den--gimme yer immies."

"Aw, Ollie," the little Jew began to beg.

"Yuh heard me."

"I'll play yuh."

"Gimme dem," Ollie commanded. Again he brushed back his yellow hair, weaving luxuriously. The sun was hot; it is never so hot as in July, and no matter how many times they wet the streets, it does no good. You can't cool streets when they become hot as the summer sun.

Then Ollie walked away with four more immies. He was eleven years and two months, Ollie was, with yellow hair and blue eyes. He was a king; his eyes twinkled like the blue sky, and he was

beautiful.

I DIDN'T HATE Ollie, because he was beautiful--not like Ralph the Wop; I just sat there after he had taken my four immies, and after a little while the hot sun made me feel better inside of myself. There was a big hole in my shoe, and there was a hole in my stocking, too, so I could see my large toe, watch it as I moved it about from side to side and then up and down. There was the toe and the street and the sun, and anyway I would have lost the immies sooner or later.

Ollie was lazy and rich; otherwise he might have taken a sock out of the little Jew bastard. But when Ollie was lazy and rich, he became big; it wasn't hard for Ollie to become big.

Now it was the morning, only half-past nine in the morning, and all of the long hot summer day stretched ahead. For Ollie, there was adventure in any one of a thousand possibilities.

Now, almost at the avenue, Ollie could look down the block. It was long--or maybe Ollie was small and the block was not so long. But the block was his, and if he stayed on the block he would be king. He wouldn't be king anywhere else; anywhere else he would have to fight his way, and when you fight, you take your chances on winning or losing. His pockets were full of round beautiful glass immies; the day was young and bright, and the spirit of adventure was hot inside of him.

He stopped to tease a cat. The cat was yellow and white; as soon as it saw Ollie, it arched its back, drew its four feet together, and began to yowl and spit. The cat knew Ollie; Ollie knew the cat.

"C'mere," Ollie said.

The cat lifted a foot, daintily, warningly.

"Pussy-pussss--"

The foot wavered, and then it wavered a moment too long, and Ollie had the cat. By the scruff of its neck he lifted it, swinging it back and forth.

"Dere, liddle yellow basted--dere, whaddya goin' t'do now? Whaddya goin' tuh do now I got yuh? Whaddya goin' t'do?"

The cat whimpered pleadingly, clawing feebly with its feet. It was an old cat, without a great deal of spirit; and it knew Ollie. Vaguely, in its cat's way, it knew that Ollie was king. What are you to do with a king, if you are a cat? If you fight back, in the end it doesn't matter, because otherwise the king wouldn't be a king. So what are you to do?

Ollie swung the cat in a great circle, and then he sent it flying through the air. Catlike, it landed on its feet, and again it paid the penalty for being an old cat, for Ollie was upon it, kneeling next to it. Spreading its paws, he turned it over.

"Hey, Ishky!" he screamed.

Ishky looked at him. Ishky had admired the battle with the cat. When it came to cats, there wasn't anyone like Ollie.

"Hey, Ishky, c'mere." Slowly, warily as the cat, Ishky approached. You could never tell about a king, or what new kind of devilishness he was up to. You had to always watch and watch. That was how life went on, otherwise it would not be endurable at all. Only if you watched, and even then you were caught plenty of times.

"What?"

"C'mere, Ishky--lookit dis cat."

"What?"

"Betcha it's a she cat, Ishky?"

"Maybe."

"Betcha--betcha I c'n tell if it's a he cat or a she cat."

"Maybe."

"Betcha you can't."

"I dunno."

"G'wan an' putcha frnger dere, Ishky. Feel aroun' an see. G'wan an' do it, Ishky."

"No.. ."

"Whatsa matter? Yuh yella? Whatsa matter witcha anyway? Geesus!"

"I ain' yella, Ollie. Hones', I ain'. Oney it's dirty."

"Well, a liddle dirt ain' goin' tuh killya."

"You do it, Ollie. I'll hol' duh cat."

'Yuh ain' got guts tuh."

"Well, lemme showya, Ollie."

Ollie glanced up at him, hesitated, then nodded. How beautiful Ollie was, with his yellow hair and his blue eyes. Those two, the most beautiful things in the world, yellow hair and blue eyes. Yellow hair like silk or spun gold;--and Ishky was looking at the yellow hair, and that was why the cat sprang away, and for no other reason than that. The hair is beautiful and fine, and the eyes sparkle like the sky; if the sky is inside of the eyes, could you expect any less than that from Ollie? But the cat got away.

"Oh-Ollie."

"Geesus Christ, yuh liddle Jew basted!"

"I swear I din' mean tuh do it, Ollie."

"I'm gonna beat duh ass offana yuh."

"I din' mean it, Ollie."

"Put up, or do yuh wan' me tuh giveya lumps?"

"I din' mean it, Ollie."

Ollie got tired of hitting him; after all, he was a king, and what was the use of fighting, when the person you fought with didn't fight back? What was the use? So Ollie left him and wandered around the corner. There was a garbage can there, full to the brim, and smelly. First, Ollie took the cover off. Then he ran at it and kicked it. The can went over, and the garbage spilled into the street. For a little while, Ollie kicked the garbage around, but he tired of that. He stood in the sun; in the garbage, hands in his pockets--

Alert, defiant, laughing inside of himself, Ollie was. Let the landlord come out, or the janitor. The janitor was a wop, and Ollie hoped he would come out himself. He split an overripe melon with his toe, scattering it onto the hot stoop. Laughing, he showed his white teeth. Let the whole world come out of the house, and it would make no difference to Ollie.

The janitor came out, raging. He was a small man, with long black mustaches, and part of a breakfast egg was still on his cheek.

"Dirty Irish louse!" he screamed.

"G'wan, yuh dago bitch!"

"Bummer!"

"Piss on yer cheek."

Then Ollie fled, laughing and waving his arms.

I WAS HURT more because Ollie had hit me than from the pain of the blows. What are blows? Blows pass, and then the pain is gone. And the pain inside of you? Well, that passes, too, I guess. I guess that all things pass, because in the end I don't remember too much. I just remember what is nice.

My name is Ishky, and even that is contempt. But there isn't contempt inside of me. Could Ollie dream the way I do about things that might happen, but don't? It is early in the morning, and everything is clean and beautiful and warm, and I am happy to be alive. I am happy even after Ollie hits me, only--

Why didn't I hit back? I thought of doing it. No matter how much Ollie hurts me, if I hit back, it's not so bad. But instead I stand there and do nothing at all, and then I begin to cry. And why is that so?

But I don't know, and, anyway, how long should I think of that when the sun is so bright in the morning? And Ollie is gone. He's gone off the block, which is what I mean when I say that he is gone.

I sit down on the curb again, and I find a little piece of wood with which to disturb the water that runs in the gutter. There is always water running in the gutter, brown and black water, wonderful water. But any water is wonderful. Don't I know that?

## TWO

ON THE BLOCK THEN, AND IT WASN'T SO LONG AGO, THERE was a division in this way. At the top, or east end, there were Americans, real old Americans, and their fathers had been American, and their fathers--nobody knows how far back. They lived in the four houses at the top of the block.

Then there were the Jews, in two houses, two small red houses. They had a certain sense of apartness, because they lived so near to the Americans.

The Italians were all in one brown house, a little shabby brown house, yet there seemed to be more Italians than Americans and Jews together.

The Spaniards were scattered here and there, and the spick gang was nothing at all, because even the Jews could beat them up.

In the middle of the block, in wooden houses, the Irish lived and ruled. They could fight like hell. You were always very careful of the micks, because they could fight like hell. Even the little shanty bastards who had nothing at all, could at least fight like hell.

There were Negroes down the block, and everyone said that it ruined the block to have black folks there, but who could stop the Negroes from coming? You never knew what was what, and then all of a sudden there were a lot of little Negroes on the street. They simply came from nowhere at all, and of course everyone said that it would ruin the block in the end. But they did no harm; they weren't people to go around picking fights.

There was more to the block than that, fences and railings and dark halls, and cellars--ah, what cellars there were, deep ones, and strange ones, and silent ones.

Mostly life was battle, battle from morning to night; it was strange how you went about, just living. But wounds heal quickly, and it is easy to forget. Even when you are hard hurt, you heal quickly.

Sometimes, there is peace. That is how it was this morning, nearing ten o'clock, hot and beautiful as only a summer day could be. Low hanging, the sun made shadows with the houses. There were birds pecking their breakfast from the street.

## THREE

IF ONLY I HAD A BEAUTIFUL NAME, LIKE ARTHUR OR Daniel. But I'm Ishky--and that's all. I knew it then, when she came to the stoop and stood there.

She had a small white dress and a blue ribbon, and she was the most wonderful creature on the block. Her name was Marie, and she was an Italian with long yellow hair. You can only imagine how beautiful she was, because I can't tell you. But she had the kind of eyes that are like flowers.

She was looking for Ollie, not exactly looking for him, but looking at everything on the street, wondering whether, perhaps, Ollie would be some part of it. She was afraid of Ollie--still.

There was nothing on the street now but Ishky and people who were grown. Ishky sat on the edge of the curb, his feet in the gutter, his head in the palm of one hand; with the other hand he stirred the murky water that ran beneath him. To Marie, he seemed aware of nothing at all--unless you would call the water that ran beneath him something. But why was he concentrating upon the water?

Marie looked at the water--plain murky water. And she tossed her head. There was nothing there to look at. Yet Ishky took on a new attraction, simply because he was looking at the water.

Marie stepped gingerly down to the sidewalk. Twice, she skipped; then she crossed the street. Then she walked in a circle about Ishky. Ishky's face burned, but he stirred the water with the same intense concentration.

"Whatcha got dere?" Marie demanded.

"Jus' wader."

"Whaddya doin' wid it?"

"Playin'."

"Whaddya playin'?"

"Jus' playin'."

Marie sat down next to him. She knew he was a Jew. When you were very close to a Jew, you felt kind of funny about it, if you remembered he was a Jew. Anyway, all the Jews were funny, funnier than the micks.

She looked at him. His shirt was dirty, and his shoes were full of holes. His toes stuck out. The Jews were very poor, but she knew they had money hidden away. Everybody said that they had money hidden away, only they never spent it. They kept it, and each night they counted their piles of gold. That was one of the queer things Jews did.

"It's dirty," she said.

"I know. No good tuh drink."

"C'n I play?"

He turned around to look at her. He had brown eyes, curly hair, and a very thin face. But his face was flushed and red, and his mouth half open. And when she looked at his face, she thought of Ollie, though she didn't know just why.

"Yuh wanna?"

"Whaddya playin'?"

"Jus' playin'. Y'wanna play?"

"Gimme yer stick."

He gave her the stick. She was so beautiful that he would have given her the world, had it been his; and he was happy. He was happy just to sit, lazy, in the sun, with her next to him.

That was all he wanted. He could see how the sunlight sparkled on her hair.

Then she threw the stick away--tossing it out into the gutter.

"Dat ain' no good."

"Yeah, I guess so."

She threw an arch sidewise glance at him. He wasn't so much, but anyway she wasn't afraid of him, like she was of Ollie. Only Ollie wouldn't sit on the curb and do nothing at all. They said that a Jew could just think of being a Jew, and that was enough.

"Whatsit like t'be a Jew?" she wanted to know.

"I dunno."

"Like bein' Christian?"

"Maybe."

"C'mon over duh stoop," she said.

They walked over to the stoop, sitting down there again. Shyly, he reached to her hand, hesitated, and then took it. Warm and small, it rested inside of his, and she glanced at him, raising her upper lip.

"Yuh mustn' do dat."

"Why?"

"It's bad."

"I don' wanna be bad."

Calculatively, she looked at him, smiling lust a little, her upper lip still raised over her gums. With a precise motion, she drew her dress down over her knees. She turned away; then she looked at him again.

"It's like lookin' at a nakid lady," she said.

"It ain'."

"Dincha never see one?"

"What?"

"A nakid lady."

Ishky stared at her, at her yellow hair and her wonderful blue eyes. "Wanna see one?"

Ishky was running across the street. She stared at him, unbelievably, and then she waved her arms over her head.

"G'wan run, yuh dirty Jew!"

YOU SEE, that was Marie, whom I loved then. Maybe I love her now, since that was not too long ago.

But where is the summer day? Everything is gone--except that I am still Ishky; but everything else is gone.

The beautiful song inside of me went. I ran into the hall, where it was dark and comfortable, and I sat down against one wall. Nobody would think of looking for me there, but who would want to look for me? Through the darkness, I stared at my fingers, counting them. One to ten--they were all there. Why did my fingers make so much difference?

But Marie--If I only could tell her some of the things I know, she would not be the way she is; for Marie is beautiful and perfect and fine. If I could tell her of the secret garden....

I read about the secret garden somewhere, and then I began to look for it. A beautiful garden, where you simply have to be happy. I knew it was somewhere.

Behind our house, there is a yard, surrounded by a high wooden fence. To get into the yard, you go through the cellar, and then up a little flight of wooden steps with an iron railing. You open the cellar door, and you are outside in the sunshine, and in front of you is the fence. And just at the bottom of the fence, a little grass grows. I knew the secret garden was there, though I had never been there.

If I could tell that to Marie--

We could both come and stare at the fence. If you have a secret word, a door in the fence opens, and then you are in the garden. I saw myself walking in the garden with Marie. Of course, there is more sunlight there than anywhere else, and what a picture the sunlight would make of Marie's hair and face! There would be flowers as blue as her eyes and as red as her cheeks....

But that's dreaming--no more than dreaming, because I'm here alone in the hall, hiding from Marie. And what if Marie should come into the hall here, looking for me? What if she should?

Jews were funny....

Marie screamed after him, "G'wan, run, yuh dirdy liddle basted, g'wan an run away!" And then she stopped abruptly, sat down with her hands in her lap, and then she began to cry. She didn't know why she was crying--except that she satisfied some desire inside of her. But she would have to cry a great deal to satisfy it completely.

Still crying, she rose and walked up the block. She crossed the street, and then, quickly, she stopped crying, rubbed her fists into her eyes. Ollie was coming.

Ollie swaggered down the block, his hands in his pockets. She didn't like Ollie, but how can you help admiring Ollie when he swaggers like that?

"Hey, Marie," he called.

"You lemme alone, you Ollie."

"Aw, Geesus, Marie, I ain' goin' tuh touchya. Whatsa matter witcha, anyway?"

"Yer allus fresh. You lemme alone, y'hear?"

"Awright."

Ollie stopped in front of her, his legs spread, his hands still in his pockets. He smiled slyly at her, his handsome face knowing and sure, and then he took a handful of something out of his pocket. Whatever it was, it sparkled and gleamed in the sunlight.

"Whaddya got?"

"Wouldncha like tuh know?"

"Aw, lemme see, Ollie." She stared eagerly, then threw back her head, laughing. "Jus' immies.

"Beauties."

They were red and yellow and blue, and the more she looked at them, the more she wanted them. Slowly, she reached out her hand.

"Git away." "Jus gimme one, Ollie."

"You git away."

"Jus one."

Ollie seemed to consider. In his role of king, he was not above being benign. First to one side, then to the other, he cocked his head. He swayed back and forth, perched on the balls of his feet. He

thrust out his hips, his hands in his pockets.

"Well," he said finally, "whaddya gonna gimme?"

"I ain' got nuttin'."

"Wanna come down duh cellar?"

"Nah."

"I ain' goin' tuh hurtya, hones', Marie."

"Whaddya gonna do?" She was wary and ill at ease. She knew what Ollie would do. She didn't want the immies, but they were an excuse for what Ollie was going to do. If she did it because she wanted the immies, that would make it all right. Then she wouldn't be bad, and she could say at confession that she had simply traded for immies. But not too quickly--

"How many immies?"

"All yuh wan'," Ollie said.

"Well..."

"Aw, c'mon."

WHEN I went down in the cellar, on my way to the secret garden, I saw her with Ollie. But I guess no matter how much you are hurt, you heal quickly. But if you are hurt too much--what then?

## FOUR

NOW YOU WOULD THINK, WOULDN'T YOU, THAT BECAUSE of this, I, Ishky, would never laugh again. I thought so myself then--until I came out into the warm sunshine. How warm the sunshine is in the summertime, and how good! There is no school, nothing but the whole day in front of you to lazy away, and if you want to do one thing or another, nobody will stop you.

A little spick was running up the street, waving his arms, and screaming, "Aily--baily, a bundle of straw, fartin' is agin' the law!"

"Shuddup" I yelled. "Shuddup, yuh dumb liddle spick." I was bigger than he.

Shomake was standing in front of his store. Shomake is as old as I, maybe, and we call him that because his father makes shoes. I don't know what his real name is. Nobody does.

He waved a hand at me. Well, I like Shomake. I waved back.

"Hey, Ishky!"

"Hey, Shomake! Wanna shoot immies?"

"Gotta practice."

Ishky crossed the street, his eyes lighting up. When he came close to the little shoe repair shop, he smelled the warm aroma of spaghetti, cooking in back. Behind the counter, the old man sat with his head bent over, swinging his hammer; he always swung his hammer like that, always.

"Gonna practice now?"

Shomake nodded his head, looking sorrowfully at Ishky out of oversize brown eyes. His face always appeared to be all eyes, and his skin was brown as a nut.

"Yeah."

"I'll wait."

They went into the back room. Out of the sunlight, there was darkness everywhere; the whole block was that way, darkness ringing sunlight. The back room was small, tight; they all lived and cooked

and slept there. At the stove, Shomake's mother stood, cooking, and the smells of the spicy cooking made the air in the room so thick that you had an impulse to cut through it with waving arms. Shomake's mother was a black splotch, vaguely indistinct in the manner of grownups. She turned around to smile at them, and Ishky thought that there was something wonderfully strange about her small white face in the dusk.

She said some words to Shomake in Italian, and Shomake answered back. Then he went into the corner and got out his fiddle. Small, bent over in a little circle, Ishky crouched on the bed, while Shomake pinked the strings of his fiddle.

"Whaddy doin'?"

"Toonin'. Dat makes duh sound right."

"How do yuh know?"

"Jus listen."

Ishky wondered how he could see his music, it was so dark there. And he was so small and the fiddle was so large. Ishky waited, trembling a little.

The music whispered into the room, and the skin all over Ishky's body rose in little prickles. He flashed a quick glance at Shomake's mother, who now stood by the stove, very straight, swaying just a little. Then he looked at Shomake.

Shomake swayed, too, with the violin. His bow hand quivered, rose, fell, trembled.

And the music came. If there was a song of that day, of all the other days of childhood on that block, might that have been it? In the little room, black and full of smells, the music came. It came and mixed with the smells--and Ishky heard it.

THAT WAS long ago, or not so long ago, I guess. If I tell this story in three parts, the first part is of the children; in the other parts, the dreams begin to go.

I look at Shomake's mother, whom everybody calls "mudder wop." That is what they call her. She wears a black skirt and a black blouse, and she never wears anything else. She stands by the stove, and in the dark--which is light enough to show--there is an expression upon her face which I cannot help noticing, even if I don't understand. I see it, and I wonder. I am Ishky, but that will not help me understand what is meant by that expression. How should I know? Still, I am suddenly conscious of my clothes. My shoes are worn through. At the toes, the fingers of my feet poke out. Glancing down, I try to hide that. I try to pull down the toes, to twist them out of sight. But that is no good. Endless things must be hidden, holes in my long black stockings, wisps of hair on my head that need cutting, a loose tooth. I pull at the tooth. "Oh, Ishky, you little fool, why don't you sit still?" She stirs the spaghetti, Shomake's mother, with an even, calculated motion, but ah the while she is looking at Shomake; and what does she see that gives her that air of majesty?

That is what I want. If I had it, I would be a king like Ollie. But I can't get it. I am just Ishky, quivering all over from the music.

Better for him to stop. Should I scream, "Stop, you fool!" But then, what would they think of me? Isn't it funny that I can't sit for a little while and listen to music?

Spaghetti--spaghetti, and music, and the big wooden spoon goes round and round, mixing. In the music, there is a beach! I read about a beach in a book, and it has palms growing upon it. Tropics, they call it, tropics, tropics, as all the time summertime on the block, with dark rooms round, and spaghetti.

I watch the bow quiver; it dances. Why can't I do that? If I had a violin, like Shomake--Just suppose that for a minute I hold Shomake's fiddle. Will be let me hold it?

Stop--stop--stop, all in time to the music. Won't he ever stop? Now his mother is a queen in my

secret garden. No, just an old wop lady. But Ollie takes Marie into the cellar to put his finger inside of her. Does Marie like it? Does Ollie like it? Does Ollie like music?

"Stop, my heart," she cried in Italian.

"Mother mine, what is it?"

"See how the child sobs on the bed! By all the saints, you have hurt him with your music. Here, my child, my little one, what is there in music that should bring tears? No tears, but gladness. Do you know that music is the soul singing?"

Ishky curled on the bed, crying bitterly. When Shomake's mother bent over him, anxiously, he pushed her away, shook his head. Shomake stood with his fiddle. What had he done? In all his heart, there was no harm meant. Then what had he done?

"Lookit, Ishky, I ain' playin' no more."

"He gotta in duh cellar."

In her excitement, she spoke in Italian, fondling Ishky, caressing him, and the soothing movement of her hands quieted his tears. "What are you saying about a cellar, my child? There is nothing in darkness to hurt you. Is it fear of darkness, here in this room of twilight? Then quiet your fears."

"I'm awright."

"No, rest, my little one, and forget about the demons inside of you."

"Awright." He didn't know what she was saying, but it was nice to feel her hands smoothing his skin. That, his mother never did. It made him feel like a big cat, curling in the dark, and suddenly he thought of the cat Ollie had swung over his head. Now he was the cat, and he liked the idea of being a cat--just a big cat curling and comfortable in the dark. How long would she stroke him?"

"You like that. Yes, my little one, beatings hurt and soft hands soothe, and we must take the good with the bad. Look, I will sit down beside you. I do not think my cooking will burn." And to her son:

"Play, my heart."

She sat down next to him. How funny she smelled, of cooking and of earth--odors. But he didn't mind the smells. And now the fiddle played again.

I, ISHKY, think that if I take Shomake and his fiddle, and we go together, we can climb the fence and find the magic garden. The music makes me think of that. I'm ashamed, because I was such an awful baby. Now I close my eyes, so that I can think of the garden. If Shomake comes into the garden, and he plays, who knows what will happen?

But if there is no garden? If we go over the fence, and there is nothing there at all? What then?

## **FIVE**

SHOMAKE'S MOTHER GIVES US EACH A HALF OF A ROLL, spread thick with butter. The butter is warm and soft and dripping, good on the white Italian bread, and we go out to the store to eat it. We sit on the bench. Behind the counter, Shomake's father works.

He's a strange man. Maybe he's a little crazy; I don't know, but he's a strange man. You see, he never says anything. If he can speak English, nobody knows about it. Nobody even knows whether he can speak in his own tongue, and some say that he is deaf and dumb. But I don't know, and I never could ask Shomake about it.

He sits and mends shoes. He's a big man--even when he's hunched over his awl, you can see how big he is, and how large and powerful his hands are. What hands they are! I think, if one hand were to grasp me about the waist, and squeeze and squeeze, why I, little Ishky, would be broken in two

just like that. Each finger is a claw of steel, and the black hairs on the backs of his hands twist and curl like wires. He has a lot of hair, and his body is big and strong, and round as a barrel. But on his head the hair is gray; his face is gray, and his large wondering eyes are gray. That's the sort of man he is.

But I like to watch him as much as I like to watch animals at the zoo. He hammers and cuts. But doesn't he think? If his wife strokes him all over his body, the way she stroked me, doesn't he think? And what does he think of then?

We eat the bread, slowly, because it's so good, licking some of the butter from the top; and sometimes Shomake's father glances at us out of his big gray eyes. Yet he doesn't seem to see us. How is that?

Even more slowly than I do, Shomake eats his bread, and he doesn't seem to notice his father at all. When his bread is all gone, he stretches his arms, yawning, and with the same motion his father's body quivers.

"Whaddya wanna do, Ishky?"

Ishky looked at him. He might understand, or he might not. Well, nothing lost, anyway.

"Y'know, behin' my house, duh yard?"

"Yeah?"

"Y'know duh fence?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, dere's grass unner it."

Ishky paused to let that sink in. This business of revealing the secret garden, the beauty and the power and the wonder of it, was becoming more than he had anticipated. How, exactly, could he put it to Shomake, so that Shomake would understand? He knew that behind the fence was the secret garden, but would Shomake believe him?

Ishky said, "Yuh know what a gaden is?"

"Yeah, wid flowers."

"Yeah, like dat. It's behin' duh fence in my yard, oney dere ain' nobody knows."

"Dat's funny. Howda you know?"

"I read in a book."

"Whatcha read--about duh fence?"

"About duh gaden, an' I can' climb over duh fence."

Rolling it over in his mind, Shomake nodded. That much was reasonable; for if the fence were high, nobody would know whether there was a garden behind it or not. And written in a book, it could not be anything but true. Shomake thought of the garden;--flowers, surely, and who knew what else? Fairies, perhaps, and any number of other things equally fascinating. He knew the fence, a high wooden fence. If it came to getting over the fence, no doubt they would find a way.

"Maybe," he considered, "dey won' led us in."

"Maybe."

"Is duh gaden empty?"

"Maybe."

Then they went out in the street together, blinking like two owls in the strong sunshine. Then Ishky saw Marie and Ollie.

Marie stood near him; Ollie stood on the other side of the street. Marie just stood, staring at the gutter, but Ollie swaggered back and forth, never looking in Marie's direction. Her long hair curled down to her shoulders, and Ishky wondered what they could find in the garden, when here, outside, Marie was so beautiful.

"C'mon," Shomake urged.

"Awright."

But he stood looking at Marie--and he knew, without seeing, that Ollie had stopped swaggering, and was looking at him. And Marie knew that he was looking at her; she glanced up to meet his eyes.

How beautiful her eyes were, softly blue, and liquid as water. Why did he want the secret garden, if not for beauty? Then, briefly, Ishky knew what he was to know on and off for many years, that beauty is the truth of the world. He felt that he became bigger and bigger as he looked at her. Inside of him, the words came with a rush, soft words and beautiful ones. "Marie, you are my heart and my desire. You see, I know. You are the world and the skies, too. I could go and die for you, bravely."

"Whaddya lookin' at?" she wanted to know.

"Nuttin'."

"C'mon, Ishky," Shomake said. "Ollie's comin'."

"Leddim come."

Ishky knew that he was doomed. But if that's the truth, why then it pays to die for the truth; and life was not much after all, just bickering and fighting. He thought, "I love you, Marie, I love you, I love you. Don't you know that I love you, how I love you?"

"Lookit yer ass!"

Ollie came across the street. Aching inside of himself, he didn't want to fight with Ishky any more than he did with Marie. But he couldn't fight with Marie. Male and female do not strike one another. And Ishky wouldn't fight--

"Leava alone, yuh dirty sheeney," Ollie yelled.

Ollie was taken off balance. Like a small dog gone mad, Ishky sprang at him, clawing and biting and spitting and kicking; and for a moment his tactics succeeded. Ollie went down with Ishky on top of him, and Ishky fastened his teeth in Ollie's small freckled nose.

"Wow--yuh dirty Jew basted!"

Marie danced about in excitement. No matter who won, it was for her. All the fury and wonder of the battle surged into her little head. She had beauty, and that could turn the world over. Would anything else make Ishky fight with Ollie? Let them fight, let them fight!

Let the world go round--men must fight for women. "Aye--lookit dem!" she yelled to Shomake.

If his violin had been broken, would it have felt what he was feeling? First there was terror inside of him, and he whispered to himself, "Shomake, run, run." But he stood still, and then the terror was replaced with hot fury. What right--what right had Ollie, curse him for a little mick bastard, to do what he was doing to his friend Ishky? He wanted to fight; why didn't he fight? He wanted to pile on top of Ollie; the two of them together could surely whip him. But he didn't. He simply stood there, watching it. And then he began to sob. And then he could stand there no longer, and he ran down the block, sobbing as if the devil himself were behind him.

Marie screamed, "Run, run yuh dirty wop! Killim, Ishky!" But she saw that Ishky would be beaten as he never was beaten before.

WHAT MADE me fight with Ollie? Did I think I would win? but I knew that I wouldn't win, and I didn't mind him calling me a dirty sheeney. My God, if I minded thinks like that, I would be

fighting with Ollie all the time, and what would be the use of that?

Now I am sitting on the roof, all bruised and hurt. This is what happened.

I bit Ollie on the nose. When you are fighting with a king, you resort to anything, but I didn't think of biting him until I found my teeth fastened over his nose. Then I found it was a good thing, so long as I didn't let go. No matter how much Ollie hurt me, I had only to bite harder to hurt him as much, or more. I didn't even feel his blows, or think of them very much. I only bit and bit, holding on to Ollie all the while. They were good tactics, while they lasted.

It ended like this. Something took me by the shoulder, heaving me up. As soon as I felt that, I knew that I had to let go, I knew that the battle was over for the time.

Ollie came at me like a raging maniac, but he stopped short, and both of us looked at the thing that was holding me.

She said in Yiddish, "Go and bury your head in muck, little infidel swine!"

My mother was a big woman, a mountain of a woman, and all over as red as a beet. And with her rage, the scarlet color always increased. Now she looked like a beet, and her shape was the shape of a beet, too. She shook me and shook me, until my brains rattled and my eyes popped, and I whimpered from the pain of her shaking me and the hurt of Ollie's blows.

Ollie crouched just short of her, eyeing her warily. He wasn't afraid--still, he wasn't prepared to do battle with a creature of her size.

"GO," she screamed, "go, heathen, and find yourself a pile of manure!"

"Aw, go take a hot crap," Ollie muttered.

"Go and consort with the devil, son of Edom," she raged, all the while continuing to shake me. "Go, you with the mind and purpose of a fiend! Go from my sight!"

"Dirty sheeney!"

"Names to call me--filth of the gentile!"

"G'wan, yuh fat louse!"

Lost entirely, she broke into English. "Vat you call me, deity rotter?"

"Yuh stinkin' Jew!"

Free for a moment, I noticed Marie. Marie stood there, absorbed, her hands on her knees. Her yellow hair was all thrown about her head and shoulders, and her mouth was wide with wonder. But even then, in the few seconds, I noticed how beautiful she was. What was the use? I loved Marie. Nothing mattered; nothing could change that. I loved her, and I would never stop loving her, and that was the way it would be until the end of time. Then I ran.

I ran into the hall of our house, and I climbed up to the roof. It was a long way, but I had to be safe; I had to be where my mother would never think of looking for me. Where else could I go but up to the roof? If she found me, she would beat me, beat me long and unmercifully. I had to be safe.

In the hall, it was dark, with just the faint flares of gas to light the way. But out on the roof it was all sunshine with the delicious smell of hot, steaming tar. I blinked, swayed from side to side. How quiet and peaceful it was!

I sit down in a corner, liking the way the soft tar takes hold of my pants, and I lean back against the wall. I am tired and hurt and bleeding in some places; I have just been fighting, and I wonder whether life will ever be anything but battles and fear from one day to another. But it will. Some day I'll grow up, and in that other world, none of these things happen. Somehow, I know that.

As much as I hurt, I don't think about it too long. Have I said before that hurt passes easily? Well, it does. The hot sun bites into my face, and soon I have stopped whimpering. I even smile a little. It

was funny in a way, Ollie and my mother screaming at each other.

Now--now you hurt, but soon it's over. When I grow up, I will have lots of money and marry Marie. (I love you, Marie.) Then she'll love me.

And I begin to think of ways I can make Marie love me. There must be any number of ways for someone as clever as I. Maybe I doze a little in the hot sun, it's so good and quiet up on the roof.

And Shomake? And the magic garden? I have forgotten them entirely.

## SIX

NOW, HOW IS IT THAT I, ISHKY, HAD NEVER THOUGHT OF this before? Was there something about that morning, that day--that my dreams should all vanish then?

You see, I am on the roof, basking in the sun, healing the hurts I have just gathered in my fight with Ollie. What a fight that was! But I heal quickly, and curling in the sun like a big cat, I am all pleasure and happiness. That's how it is with one, first battle and struggle, and the next moment ease and pleasure. Sometimes at night, with the gas turned very low, my mother sobs bitterly, rocking back and forth. "Oh, such a life," she moans in Yiddish. "Oh, what a life for one to be thrust into! Why and what for? From the pains of labor to the dusk of death there is nothing but pain and horror. What for? What for?"

But I am not like that. Most of the time I am very happy living, and why shouldn't I be, with all the good things in life? So how did this idea occur to me? He sat on the roof in the sun, a bundle of not-too-good clothes, with his legs curled way up. He was a very small boy, with thin legs and thin hands and large brown eyes and freckles, and he began to think again of the magic garden.

Whenever there was nothing else to think of, he could think of the magic garden. He could think of how it would be only a matter of time until he was large enough to climb over the fence, and then--why, the magic garden would be his. But might it not be too late then? One grew up, and if he were to rock back and forth like his mother, then--?

He made a face at the thought of his mother, she was so fat and ugly. He shouldn't hate her; God would not like that. Up in the sun, maybe behind the sun, was God. God knew everything. God would disapprove, if he thought that his mother was ugly. Still, he would never be like his mother.

Downstairs in the yard, it was cool and gray, and the fence that closed in the magic garden cast a long shadow. But there was grass growing from beneath the fence, and that grass gave a faint, fascinating suggestion of what lay in the garden itself.

And now the thought struck him. The roof--what about the roof? But what a little fool he was, never to have thought of that before! Surely, it was plain enough--he had only to look over the back of the roof to see behind the fence, to gaze into the garden. And he had never thought of it before--

Oh--wunnerful," he whispered. "Dat's what I shoulda done long ago."

Rising to his feet, carefully, cautiously, he began to move, trembling a little, he was that excited.

Stalking like a red Indian, he approached the back of the roof, and he looked over. For a moment, he stared, and then he sank back to the roof, shaking with short, dry sobs.

Because, in the garden, there was nothing but piles rubbish.

## SEVEN

SO YOU SEE HOW IT WAS WITH ME, THAT I WAS LEFT ALL alone on the roof, trying to make something out of nothing. I would never be happy again; how could I ever be happy again? How could I be sure that everything in life wouldn't be like this, an illusion that would pass away as

soon as you probed into it? Well, the secret garden was gone, Marie was gone; indeed, everything had been taken away from me, and anyway, what was the use of going on?

I heard my mother calling from the window. "Ishky --Ishky, vare are you?"

I tried to bury myself in the hot tar of the roof. So soon, I would have to go down and eat my lunch. I made little balls of the tar, and threw them away from me, watching the way they bounced, and finally stuck to the roof. And then in the middle of my crying, I managed to smile a little--because one of the pellets remained fastened to a clothesline where it had struck, just remained fastened like that. And here I smiling again. Well, Ishky, you are a little fool, and that's all there is to it.

But I kept on smiling. If the secret garden wasn't behind our yard, then it was somewhere else. Certainly, was somewhere else.

Someone was coming from the next roof. As soon as was out of the glare of the sun, I recognized Thomas Edison. I don't know why everyone calls him Thomas Edison, but he is really nothing to be afraid of. He's big and kind of fat--but crazy. Everyone knows that is crazy, that something is wrong inside of his head.

He has a funny dull look on his face, his eyes popping, his mouth open, but I guess that's not his fault, only a part of his being crazy; I guess anyone who is crazy looks a lot like that. Some people say that he is Ollie's brother, but Ollie won't admit it, and with micks you can't be sure who is whose brother. I don't mind him, and sometimes I feel very sorry for him--he not being able to dream and dream, the way I do.

Thomas Edison crossed three roofs, and then he saw Ishky. In the beginning, he hadn't known what drew him to the roofs. But on the roofs were sunlight and cool winds that blew in from the river, and there was freedom of a sort and nobody to laugh at him. He knew that more than anything else he hated to have people laugh at him.

When he saw Ishky, he halted, eying him warily. Ishky was Ishky, whom he remembered; Ishky was too small to beat him up, and if he had to, he could beat Ishky up. But he wouldn't unless he had to. Why should he beat anyone up when the warm sunshine and the cool air from the river made him feel so contented? Putting a leg over the wall between the roofs, he stared at Ishky, who stared back at him with a curious, even intentness.

"Whaddya lookin' at?" Thomas Edison demanded.

"Nuttin',."

"Y'are so."

"No I ain'."

"Whaddya lookin' den?"

"Jus lookin'."

Hoisting himself over the wall, he let himself drop down on Ishky's side; then, hands in pockets, he came swaggering toward Ishky, ready to fight or flee, not quite sure even now which he would prefer.

"Hey, Ishky."

"Hullo."

"Wanna match pennies?"

"Ain' got none."

"Betcha yuh got."

"I swear I ain'," Ishky protested.

"Yer a dirty liar. Jews allus got money."

"Awright, search me."

Pocket after pocket Ishky turned inside out, to show only crumbs and little specks of dirt, and with each revelation Thomas Edison shook his head in disgust.

"See," Ishky said, shaking the crumbs onto the ground. "Dere ain' nuttin' at all, 'cept dirt."

"Yeah."

Thomas Edison sat down next to him, finding comradeship of a sort in the fact that Ishky had told the truth. It was nice to have someone who would tell you the truth, and of whom you weren't afraid.

"I ain' scareda yuh," he told Ishky.

"Yeah."

Ishky rolled another tar ball, throwing it at the clothesline. But it came nowhere near it. Well, that's the way things were.

" "Whaddya doin'?"

"Rollin' tar balls."

"Dere good tuh eat."

"Yeah."

They each rolled a tar ball and chewed on it. Ishky liked the way it stuck to his teeth and the warm sticky taste of it. When he spat, his spittle was hot and black.

"Tars good," he said.

"Yeah."

"Good as gum."

"Yeah."

"Oney yuh don' dare swalla it."

"I swalla it," said Thomas Edison. I swalla it whenever I wanna. I ain' no dirty Jew."

"I ain'," Ishky said.

"Y'are so." "I ain'."

"ver yella t'do anythin' a Jew wouldn' do, ver yella tuh say, screw duh dirty Jews."

"I ain' yella," Ishky said firmly, but he was wavering. These were terrible words, and he wondered how he could sit there so calmly, listening to such terrible words. Up--way up beyond the sun was God; and if the hand of God were to come down and strike him! But since Thomas Edison was wrong inside--didn't that make everything all right?

"Say it."

"Awright, awright--I'm goin' tuh say it, ain' I? Ain' I gonna say it?"

"Yer yella."

"Awright, screw duh dirty Jews--screw duh dirty Jews. Dere, yuh tought I wouldn'."

Thomas Edison was impressed. Into even his dim mind this defiance of the great God penetrated. What would happen? But here, nothing was happening.

"Geesus, Ishky," he said.

"I ain' yella."

"I din' say yuh was yella, Ishky."

"Yuh said it."

"Look--cross my heart, I din', Ishky. Look, duh fader, son, an 'hully ghust--lookit dat, Ishky."

"Awright."

"You an' me be pals?"

"Awright."

BUT HAD I, Ishky, done right? Why had I denied my God?--for that was what it amounted to. But I knew that I was lonely, and even if he wasn't right in his head, it was better for him to like me than not to like me. You know how that is, how you get tired of all I the things in life, the fighting and all of that, and how you want things to be easier.

Now I sit with him in the sun and chew on tar balls, I am not telling all these things for no reason at all; one thing leads to another, and I want you to see how that is, how full of these things life is, how you are happy one moment, and the next?--

"Waddy gonna do, Ishky?"

He wanted to show him. He had thrown off the Jew, even if only for a moment, and he had assumed some sort of splendor that was better than his rags and his thin body. Thomas Edison looked up to him. He might have considered that it was very little to be worshiped by a subject like that; but Ishky did not consider it at all.

"Wanna play?" he inquired.

"Yeah." "

Wanna folla duh leader?"

"Awright."

Ishky led away, bounding over the roof, Thomas Edison following after. Ishky swung on a clothesline, looped his feet, and returned to the roof. He dashed to the edge, straddled it, and gazed at the sidewalk. So far away, with people as big as dolls, no bigger. He wanted to jump. No. Not down there, not down there. But to be big, and let the world look at you, admiring; as if Thomas Edison were the world. Yet why not? But away from the edge--come away from the edge, Ishky, before you tumble over.

"Geesus, Ishky!"

"Tought I was yella, huh?"

"Don' go near duh edge, Ishky."

Thought I was yella."

He tumbled back onto the roof, back on the roof that was strong and solid and enduring. If he had fallen, he would have gone over and over, but he would have had guts. Turning, he raced to the narrow airshaft.

The airshaft in that sort of tenement was no more than six or seven feet wide, with a low wall binding it in. And all the way down, from top to bottom, clotheslines were strung, back and forth, from the roof to the rubbish below.

(Look at the airshaft, Ishky! There is glory in the meanest ways of life, if only you look for it.) At the airshaft, he paused, glancing at Thomas Edison who came puffing behind him. How foolish he looked, with his poor round face that held no intelligence at all; but he would know glory--he would have to laow glory. What was glory without an audience, anyway? Oh, if only Ollie were here now!

"Y 'tought I was yella.

"Whaddy gonna do, Ishky?"

Wou ain' got guts t'do what I'll do."

"Yeah, Ishky?"

"Y'tought I was yalla."

"Yeah, Ishky--whaddy gonna do?"

"Gonna jump over duh airshaft."

"Geesus, Ishky."

'Y'gotta folla."

"I can' do it, Ishky."

"Yuh gotta. Or else, yer yella. Yer yella--dat's all."

He prepared to jump. If he fell--but he must not think of falling. He had to jump--all the way over. God--God! But he had given away his God to Thomas Edison.

(Jump then, Ishky--what are you waiting for?)

"Yuh'll get kilt."

He ran back, leaped forward, sprang to the wall and out into space. Only then--he didn't know why, but he knew he wouldn't reach the other side. The airshaft was long and narrow, and miles down, and all those miles he would go tumbling and twisting, to be crushed into nothing at all at the bottom. Why had he done it? What was glory, when life was so beautiful in the sunshine? His foot just touched the opposite wall; then his body was flung back into the airshaft. Thomas Edison saw, and he wailed and screamed, a thin terrible wailing and screaming; for in his clouded mind he understood death better than anyone else of his age would have.

Ishky hit a clothesline; the line held for a moment, then it broke. He was falling until he hit another. But he could think; he could think of the death that was rushing up from the bottom of the shaft.

Like a rubber ball, his body bounded from one line to another, and each line hit him like a thin whiplash. The walls of the shaft reeled dizzily about him. And at the bottom, the rubbish awaited him, piled a good five feet high.

WHEN I plunged into the rubbish, it seemed that I, Ishky, was not even hurt. I was cut on one cheek, but that is all. Can there be a God in heaven after all? Can I be alive?

I sit up, and look at the broken clotheslines. How can it be? But I am alive; that is all that matters. I've jumped off the roof, and I am alive. I hear Thomas Edison wailing, but what is that, when I am alive, with only a cut cheek?

(Only--get out of here, Ishky. Windows are opening, and you have broken their clotheslines. Get out of here quickly.)

## **EIGHT**

ALL I KNOW IS THAT I MUST GET AWAY AND HIDE. Suddenly, I have plunged off a roof, and all the peace of a summer day is shattered. Why did I do it? What on earth could ever have prompted Ishky to do a thing like that?

And, strangest of all things, I am alive and not hurt too much.

Thomas Edison is screaming on the roof. (Be quiet, fat fool--it is I who fell off, not you!) And windows are opening. A quick tumble through an open cellar window, and I am out of the airshaft

and into the black cellar. But still, I plainly hear the shouts and the screams. I look up slyly. Yes, a woman is leaning out of the window and screaming; what is she screaming about?

It comes to me like this--as if someone is saying: Oh, Ishky, you have done a terrible thing. You have tried to die. In fact, you have died. You are dead. You see, you, Ishky--

Who is dead? If I pinch myself, see how it hurts. But the cellar is so black, especially here in the coal bin where I have crawled. When I hold my hand in front of my face, I can't see it. Then maybe I am dead. Who knows? It is so black here that one cannot be very sure whether he is alive or dead.

What I don't understand and never will be able to understand, is how, so soon after a terrible thing, I am acting as if it had never happened at all. I mean jumping off the roof; for I am not thinking of that any more, except that my face and body hurt a little. I am thinking of how it would be if Marie was here in the cellar with me.

PRETENDING, I say: "You see, Marie, my dear, that it is really much nicer to be down here with me than with Ollie."

Marie says: "Yes--true. Now I wonder why that should be?"

I say: "I could tell you that, Marie, my dear."

She says: "You are so wonderful Ishky. How is it I never knew before? Yes, do tell me."

I say: "You see, my darling Marie, I am a person Of splendid dreams and fancies, who will be a king, or at least a millionaire some day. And who is Ollie?--"

She says: "Of course, I have always loved you."

I say: "Yes, I know."

She says: "Won't you kiss me, Ishky?" I say: "Here in the cellar?"

She says: "It doesn't matter--so long as you kiss me, Ishky."

AND the middle of all that, I heard someone screaming, "Ishky--Ishky--Ishky--Gott!"

Can it be my mother's voice? I hear, in Yiddish, "Oh, God of Gods, what have you done with my son? Where is he, my jewel, my precious one, my beloved? What have you done with him, after the halfwit threw him from the roof? Oh, Ishky, my child, where are you?"

"Quiet--quiet, and we will find him." To solace me with his broken body. God!"

"Maybe he is not dead."

"My man will destroy me! Where is my jewel?"

And all through this, I am hiding in the coal bin. Should I come out? But my mother will only beat me; am quite certain that she will beat me. Then what shall I do--hide here in the coal for the rest of my life? But that's quite out of the question.

What then to do, when I can hear her crying, "Where ire you, my heart?"

Someone says, "Maybe it was not he who fell off the roof." And someone else, "I saw the body drop, like a bundle of clothes."

And my mother, "No--he is dead. I know he's dead." What a little fiend I am to remain here in the coal!

The big red--faced, red--armed, red--eyed woman saw him emerge from the cellar stairs. She was standing in the hall, sobbing, when he came sheepishly and shamefully out of the cellar. Literally, he was black; his face was black, his clothes and his arms were black. He stood at the top of the cellar steps, looking at her. "Oh, my heart, my love," she cried. "I fell offana duh roof."

"God has preserved thee!"

"Gonna hit me?"

"No, no, my child."

She folded him into her large red arms, pressing her face against his dirty face, sobbing and shaking against him. His life now was more than the world had ever given her before, like having labor pains all over, and she sat on the steps rocking him back and forth. Had she been cruel? Then she would make up for it in one way or another.

"Thy face is cut . . ."

"Yeah--dat's where I fell."

"Yes, yes, I will make it better, my little one. You will see how thine mother will heal thy face."

New life now for her and her man. How could she have said to him, when he came from his work, that his son was dead?

She took him upstairs, and in the little kitchen, she washed his face and hands. A piece of plaster brought the cut together, and when she could finally smile, she saw his full lips tremble into a smile, too.

"You will never go to the roof again," she said.

"Naw." And then he added, "I'm hungry."

"God forgive me," she said in her rapid Yiddish, "I am starving the breath of my life. What will you have, my child?"

"I dunno."

"Some eggs--some milk and cake and bread?"

"Awright."

Still panting, she went to the stove, and Ishky sighed with relief. He had not been beaten, which only went to show that it never paid to worry. Things came out all right, somehow. But, still, she was very hot and uncomfortable in her love. A mother like Marie would be better, like Marie grown up, with yellow hair and blue eyes. If he only had such a mother--

"Eat, my pride."

"Awright."

"The food is good to one who has come back from the dead?"

"Yeah."

"You are hungry--with all your fear?"

"Yeah."

Then eat and eat, my little one, until there is not a shred of food left on your plate."

"Awright."

"Poor, hurt, tiny one."

He gulped his food down. He wanted to be out. He wanted to go downstairs, to tell Marie what a wonderful thing he had done.

I WONDER just how much one thing is related to another. If I had not fallen from the roof, would I have ever had Marie?

Now I am happy and tired; I have escaped a beating. And outside the sun is still shining. I have only to gulp down my food to be out there in the sunshine.

## NINE

MARIE, TOSSING HER HEAD, FLINGING HER YELLOW HAIR from side to side, paraded back and forth in front of her house. Now and then, she stopped to regard an outthrust leg, cocking her head from one side to another, and her movement was full of instinctive coquetry and grace. Oh, she knew what she was about, and she said to herself that if Ishky were going to be such a fool--well, she would waste only a minute or two more upon him.

Ishky sat on his stoop, rolling an immie from one hand to another, watching it flash and sparkle as it twisted through the air. If Ishky had an accomplishment, it was the ability to concentrate upon one thing to the exclusion of all else--apparently. And now, to the rest of the world, it seemed that he was concentrating all his powers upon the immie. There was nothing else but the immie, which, for all of him, might be one of the rarest of jewels. Did anyone think otherwise?

Thomas Edison came toward him cautiously, with a good deal of awe. Thomas Edison rolled his moon face and looked at the immie.

"Hey, Ishky."

Immie from hand to hand--immie from hand to hand.

"Hey, Ishky!"

Marie said to herself, "Huh, anyone could do it. Jumping off a roof! As if there were anything to that!"

"Hey Ishky."

Ishky thought, "Marie is across the street. Then is she watching me? But who else, if not me? Will she come over here?"

"Hey, Ishky!"

He glanced up. "Whaddya wan'?"

"you ain' saw?"

"Naw, I ain' saw."

"Wasya hurt?"

"Gotta liddle cut."

"Geesus!"

"Yeah."

Thomas Edison stood there hesitatingly, and Ishky went on rolling his immie from hand to hand. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Marie had stopped her walking. She was staring at him now. Did that mean she would come over?

"C'n I sit by yuh, Ishky?"

"Yeah."

Thomas Edison sat down by him, still staring at the immie. The more he stared, the more magic there appeared to be in the immie; and he hoped Ishky would not chase him away.

And now Marie, facing gingerly toward Ishky, stepped into the gutter. Slowly, she came toward Ishky, ruffling out her dress. Ah, how beautiful she was--all everlasting and wonderful beauty. That is what Ishky thought.

"Aw, Ishky!" she cried.

He glanced up at her, glanced down quickly then at his immie, and with that Marie felt herself

burning up inside.

"Dirty liddle louse--sittin' wid a halfwit!" she screamed.

Ishky paid no attention, but Thomas Edison screamed back, "Go screw, youh wop!"

"Lousy mick!"

"Go screw!"

"Stinkin' lousy mick!"

Thomas Edison rose to his feet. He hated girls. They were like roaches and bedbugs, put in the world for no other purpose than that of creating misery, and most of their jabs were directed at him. He knew that he was a halfwit, and most of the time he accepted the fate with a good deal of complacency. Sometimes, he was even proud of it. But girls never made him proud of it.

Now he knew what he would do with her. He would smear her clean dress with mud from the gutter, and he would smear the mud on her face too. And he would laugh while she screamed and clawed. She stood waiting for him. "Lousy mick!"

"Yuh'd better run."

"Doncha touch me."

Then Ishky put a stop to what might have followed. "Ledda alone," he commanded.

"Geesus, Ishky, lookit duh way she cussedya."

"Ledda alone."

"Awright."

"An' git oudda here."

"Yuh said I could sit by yuh."

"Well, I don' wancha tuh now. G'wan an' git oudda here."

Mournfully, Thomas Edison walked away. Another time he would have threatened battle. But Ishky had jumped off the roof--so what was the use of threatening battle?

And Ishky went on playing with his immie, wondering how far he could go with this new power. Power was everything, power and glory. Now Marie was looking at him. Well, she must know that he had jumped off the roof.

She walked toward him, until she stood just above him, and he could see how she stood there, swinging one leg back and forth. Life went on with power and glory, and the hot sun made him warm and comfortable. If he touched the leg, what would she do?

"Hey, Ishky."

"Hullo," he said.

The leg swung back and forth; it paused, stopped; then it began to swing again.

"I din' mean what I calledya."

"Dincha?"

"Cross my heart, I din', Ishky."

"Howda I know?"

"Look. Ishky, I'm gonna cross my heart. Lookit dat, Ishky. I crosst my heart."

"Awright."

"Y' believe me if I cross my heart, doncha, Ishky?"

"Yeah."

With a dainty but calculated motion, she sat down next to him, tossing her hair. Now he pocketed his immie, looked at her, and for a moment their eyes held. He saw that her eyes were blue as the sky, and he felt a great rush of gladness in his love for her. Time would pass, but he, Ishky, would love her until the end of time.

"Howdya jump offana duh roof?" she wanted to know.

"Jus' jumped."

"Jus' like dat?"

"Yeah, jus' like dat."

"My goonnus," she said admiringly.

"Yeah, it wasn' nuttin'."

"It was too. Betcha nobody else coulda done it. It was awful brave."

"Yeah?"

"Betcha Ollie wouldna done it."

"Maybe."

"Anyway, Ollie's jus' talk."

His heart throbbing, he leaned toward her. Did she mean what she said, or was she playing with him?

"Marie?"

"Yeah?"

"Whoya like better, me or Ollie?"

She cocked her head, tossed it, and smiled saucily. She looked at him out of the corners of her eyes, leaning just the least bit toward him; and then, abruptly, she shook her head.

"Who?"

"I dunno."

"Sureya do."

"Yer nicer'n Ollie."

## TEN

NOW SOME PEOPLE WILL NOT THINK THAT OUR STREET IS beautiful. Indeed, I know that many times, I, Ishky, have said to myself, "Surely this is the least beautiful spot in the world." I guess you could understand that. East to west, it is nothing but drab walls of wood and brick. The wooden houses are old, and they seem to be falling into decay; the brick houses are not a great deal better.

So you can see how, when it does look beautiful, you feel it. But I don't know; and I guess that when it does look beautiful, it is something inside of you that makes it beautiful.

INSIDE Of me, then. I am Ishky, and it is hot summer, so hot that everything moves slowly; and now more than any other time, I am not much to look at.

If you ask my mother, she will tell you that I am nothing at all. So how is it that I am a king? Now, I am not sure yet, but I think that Ollie is no longer king. And all this was done by jumping from a roof.

The Lord God preserved me, as he preserved Joseph, who was sold as a slave into Egypt. Maybe I will turn out to be like Joseph, because I am quite sure he could have been no more clever than I. I've won Marie.

I can't tell you enough of my love for Marie. It is all squeezed up inside of me, and I have never spoken of it, not even to Marie. But nevertheless, it is a wonderful thing. When I thought of the secret garden, it was always for Marie. And when I do wonderful things, I do them for Marie, who is quite the most beautiful person in the world. If I am great, it is just because of Marie, and for no other reason.

And now the block is beautiful. The sky is as blue and as clear as any sky can ever be. The sun is shining, like a large, end-on, yellow lemon in the sky. The cement is hot, so hot that everything bakes warm and comfortable. And I walk down the street with Marie.

How is it that I notice things about Marie, which I notice in nobody else? How is it that I see every tuft and curl in Marie's yellow hair? How is it that I watch every shadow that passes across her face? Is it only that I love her?

This time I have courage enough to take hold of her hand.

A forlorn figure, Shomake came up the block. He had been fighting with a large colored boy called Blackbelly. This is how it came about.

When Shomake saw the fight, he ran away, and he never knew whether Ollie had beaten Ishky, or Ishky beaten Ollie; but his running away hurt more than any fight could have.

He ran down the block, and all the time he was thinking, "I'm yellow--yellow." He wanted to hide, but where can one hide in a bright, sunny street? Half crying, his sobs came bitter and hard, short gasps of dry breath.

Shomake was a gentle boy. He possessed to a large degree the ability to be hurt, but he himself could not be hurt. Everything hurt him. Once, when his mother cut her hand badly, he had sobbed and whimpered for hours. And again, when he had seen Thomas Edison being beaten unmercifully by Ollie, he had sprung madly at Ollie, to take his beating along with Thomas Edison. And later he had said to himself:

"If Ollie is his brother, why, why?"

His fiddle was alive, he always thought, and he loved the music better than anything else. But when something happened, it was always music that he could not get away from; and now the hot sun would not let him escape. Ishky was being beaten, and he was running from Ishky, leaving him.

(Coward, you, Shomake, yellow, dirty son of a dago bitch.)

Counterpoint. When his mother had attempted to explain counterpoint, she said, "It is like the two souls of man inside of him, struggling and struggling." And that was love and hate, love and hate. He had to get out of the sun, or the beating in his brain would destroy him.

Down near the bottom of the block there was a dark alley where some colored people lived. Ordinarily, Shomake would not have gone near the alley. Now he couldn't be afraid, and he dashed into it. And there he met Blackbelly.

Blackbelly went around saying that he had killed a white boy. Of course, nobody believed it, but that was what he said. He also said that he wasn't afraid of any white boy on the block, and because of this he had to be mighty careful, running with his gang most of the time. But once when Ollie had caught him without his gang, there had been a terrible fight, which nobody ever forgot. Blackbelly ended the fight by hitting Ollie over the head with a bottle, but that hadn't decided it one way or another. Ollie still insisted that he would get Blackbelly. And Blackbelly said, "Come and get me."

When Shomake saw Blackbelly, he knew he would be beaten. But there was still time to turn and

make a run for it.

Shomake stood there in the half--darkness, trembling.

"Whereya goin', dago?"

The music in his head didn't stop. Because he was afraid, Shomake knew that he was a coward. He would turn and run. This place was dark and terrible as hell itself.

"Boy, yer sure scared."

"Not afraid!" Shomake screamed. "I'll killya!"

"G'wan, kill me den. G'wan an' kill me, yuh dirty rodden black basted." And with that he threw himself at Blackbelly.

Blackbelly beat him thoroughly. But he couldn't put too much heart into it. This was not fighting. This was slaughter, more or less.

Afterward, Shomake sat on the curb, sobbing to himself. All over, his body ached, but there was more hurt than that in his heart, and he was not able to throw it off the way Ishky had. Why had Christ died, if the world was only this?

The sun, so hot, only made him suffer more. False beauty. He wanted to go home and put his head in his mother's lap, but that would not solve the whole thing. Still, he had to solve it.

Maybe--if he went to Ishky-- He sat there sobbing and thinking for a long time. Maybe if he went to Ishky, they could go and look for the magic garden again. Then, for the first time, he smiled a little, remembering the garden the way Ishky had described it. And it was so near--only in the back of Ishky's house.

If you could go into the garden, just like that, couldn't you stay there? And then, maybe, you could stay there all the time.

Awkwardly, he got to his feet, and he began to shamle up the block. There, sure enough, was Ishky, and Marie was with him.

"Hey, Ishky," he called.

Ishky began to swagger. He wondered what Shomake would think, seeing him holding Marie's hand like that.

"Hey, Ishky!"

Marie turned up her nose.

"Wanna play, Ishky?"

"He's a dirdy wop," Marie confided to Ishky.

"Yeah."

"Wanna find duh gaden?"

And then Shomake stood stunned and forlorn; Ishky had swaggered past without ever noticing him.

## **ELEVEN**

NOW--THE FIGHT BETWEEN BLACKBELLY AND OLLIE. YOU must understand why this fight was inevitable, and how out of this fight developed the compact gang formation which divided the block into two distinct parts. The last time they had fought, Blackbelly had shed Ollie's head with a broken bottle; but if Ollie resented anything about this, it was the fact that the bottle had not come into his hand before it came into Blackbelly's. A broken bottle was legal enough in any fight.

Out of that, Ollie began to vision his gang, a close, well-knit gang to drive the Negroes out of the lower end of the block. Now, Ollie was no fool; more than a he was a person who thought a great deal. He knew that he hated the Negroes. In the upper part of the block, he was king; but when he walked down the block he took his safety into his hands. He thought of a time when the block would be his, from east to west. It meant beating the Negroes, and that meant organizing a gang. But when it came to organizing, he was strangely helpless.

This is the way the combination between Ishky and Ollie came about--after Ollie had heard of Ishky's feat of leaping from the roof.

WHAT HAVE I done to Shomake now? He used to be my friend, and now? Now I walk past him, and even though I see the expression upon his face, it doesn't affect me.

(Ishky, what do you know of a woman, except to worship her?)

Afterward, I would say to myself, "It is all Marie's fault." Yet how is that possible? I love Marie, and to me she is the perfect woman above all other women. So how can the fault be Marie's?

Now, in spite of what I have done to Shomake, I am quite happy.

"Y'like tuh read, Marie?"

"Sometimes. What's duh gaden?"

Jus sumpen I tol' Shomake."

"He's a dumb wop."

"Yeah--y'like 'venture stories?"

"Sometimes. Where's duh gaden?"

"What gaden?"

"Duh one yuh tol' Shomake about."

"I dunno."

"Den whyya talkin' all about a gaden?"

Jus' fer fun."

She glanced sidewise at him, and then she said, "Is It dark in duh gaden?"

"I dunno."

"Awright--take yer pissy gaden. See if I care."

How is it that I can't tell Marie about the garden? I told Shomake about it, and--I don't love him; and I love Marie, so why can't I tell her about the garden? But I can't. Maybe I am afraid that she would laugh at me. I know that I don't want Marie to laugh at me, ever. And it doesn't matter anyway, since there is no garden.

Blackbelly saw them walking down the block. Well, that's what a woman can do to a man. Blackbelly knew Ishky, and he knew that Ishky was not a person to be caught very often in the lower end of the block. Blackbelly waited; then, when they were close to him, he sauntered out into their path.

He stood like a small blob of solid ink in their path. His eyes on the ground, Ishky saw Blackbelly's shadow first, and then he looked up into Blackbelly's round ace. Then he felt Marie cringe against him. Then he tried to smile; but he didn't know why. He knew, though, that with Marie next to him, he couldn't run away. A hundred times before, he had been caught the same way; and each time there was a moment in which he whirled and fled away. That was life--sometimes you stood and sometimes you ran, but unless you were an utter fool, you never stood when the odds were this heavy against you.

Now he was a fool. The moment when he had sprung across the airshaft leaped into his mind. Glory--and what was life when it came to glory? He might have said, "Oh, my wonderful Marie, you will see that no sacrifice is too eat for you."

And Blackbelly--if he had stood that way on a jungle path a hundred years ago, he would have been more than splendid. He was just splendid now, because he was still too young to know that a nigger should cringe, and old enough to know that he hated all whites.

"Whereya goin', white boy?" he drawled.

You don' own duh ground." Ishky said.

"Yuh dirty nigger," Marie said.

"G'wan, yuh liddle whore."

Ishky said, "Shuddup!" Inside of him, Ishky felt funny little bubbles of heat. He began to tremble as the rage crept over his small body. This was doom, but doom and glory came together. What's dat?"

Ishky said, "Yuh take dat back?"

This struck Blackbelly as no end funny, and arms akimbo he began to laugh, rolling back and forth on the balls of his feet.

"Yuh take dat back?"

"Boy--o--boy."

"You lousy stinkin' nigger!" Marie yelled. Then, as Blackbelly took a step toward her, she ran screaming toward the other end of the block. Ishky, everything else forgotten, turned around to look after her.

Then Blackbelly leaped on him. Under the weight of Blackbelly's hard, round body, Ishky went down. It seemed that the world was upon him, smothering him. Blackbelly's fists were already pounding into him.

He tried to fight back, but what was the use? A blow in the face took most of the fight out of him. He stopped struggling; he lay still, hurt, only wondering how long Blackbelly would continue to beat him. Tears welled slowly into his eyes, but he didn't cry.

Blackbelly stood up, staring down at the twisted, small form of the other boy. It struck something strange inside of him; thus, all of a sudden, he wished to fight no longer.

"Gittup," he said.

Ishky lay there, his body trembling with dry sobs.

"Gittup, white boy."

"Lemme alone."

Yuh yella basted."

"Lemme alone."

"Yuh'd better git up, or I'll beat duh ass offana yuh. Yuh'd better git up."

Then, glancing up, Blackbelly saw Ollie coming; and that same deep strange thing inside of him told him that Ollie would fight, that this would be the fight of their lives. He could still run. This was his land Ollie was invading, and there was still time to run. He could call, if he wished to, and he could smother Ollie with dark, eager bodies.

But he did nothing, only waited. This was a battle of kings, and he had no desire to avoid it. He kicked Ishky, and then he forgot about Ishky. He clenched his fists.

## TWELVE

SLOWLY, WEIGHING HIS CHANCES, OLLIE ADVANCED TO the battle. Now for Ollie, this was no new thing. Life was, always, eat or be eaten. No law existed beyond the strength of your body, the quickness of your fists. This land he lived in was the land of fang and claw. A man stood in himself; the weak perished and the strong became stronger. And if you were strong enough, you became king. Now he was king.

They were going to fight. In neither's mind was there any doubt about that. Nevertheless, in the way of those who live by fang and claw, they could not advance to the fight immediately. Perhaps their challenges and blustering hearkened back to something deep in the human makeup, that civilization has successfully bred out. The trained killer can strike like a snake. They were children of battle; but they were not trained killers.

Ollie advanced without hate, but he knew how necessary hate was to successful fighting, and, inside of himself, he fanned his rage, thinking of all the vile things that had ever been attributed to Negroes. Wary, perched upon the balls of his feet, his eyes shot about him. Dangerous land this. He tried not to think of that, tried to think only of what he would do to Blackbelly.

"Hey, yuh dirty nigger," he called.

Blackbelly eyed him from between thick, dark lids. Blackbelly's eyes were slits of yellow and brown. He stood like a brown stump on the sun--baked street.

"Run off, white boy," he said.

"I ain' runnin' from no nigger."

"I'll break yer ass, white boy."

"Jus try it!"

"Boy--yuh wanna fight?"

"I ain't fightin' no yella niggers!"

"Yer yella."

"Who's yella?" demanded Ollie. Then he glanced down at Ishky, who was now sitting up, drawing himself over to one side. Ishky knew what was coming, and he watched eagerly. And Ollie--here in enemy country, with the fight close upon him, Ollie drew quickly upon some fancied kinship of skin. Or perhaps it was the old instinct of the feudal lord to protect his serf. Anyway, he threw a finger at Ishky. "Whatcha hittim fer, Blackbelly?"

"Doncha call me Blackbelly"

"I'll call any goddam nigger what I wan'."

"Doncha call me dat agin," Blackbelly warned.

"Whatcha wanna hittim fer?"

"Nunna yer goddam business."

"Whoya cussin'?"

"You."

"Den eat it!"

"Make me."

Ollie leaped at him. Blackbelly crouched, his arms working like pistons, his feet moving slowly and steadily. Blackbelly was the heavier by a good fifteen pounds, but Ollie moved like a cat, leaping in and out, swaying upon the balls of his feet, pounding always at Blackbelly's face. Sometimes, they

closed, standing toe to toe, beating each other as well as they could. Then they would leap apart, stare at each other, panting. Ollie's blond skin was splotched and bruised. A thin trickle of blood ran from his nose.

Blackbelly wanted to beat the other down. Closer to earth than Ollie, he could see himself standing as he was through all time, and presently the white boy would be gone. Instinctively, perhaps, he knew that there was nothing lasting about Ollie. He himself was too solid to be destroyed, too solid.

And Ollie fought with red rage in his heart, feeling nothing--unless it was the stretching of time. Minutes appeared to be hours, until it seemed to him that he had been fighting forever. And he would go on fighting forever. Tears streamed down his face, soft curses wrenching themselves from between his clenched lips. "Goddamit--dat!"

"White basted!"

"Lousy--"

"Yella--"

Ishky was screaming, "Ollie--Ollie, kill duh lousy nigger, killim, Ollie!"

Sharp pains in his hands, lights before his eyes, and battle, and battle. The yellow hair was stained with blood; to Ishky he appeared to be the son of some warrior god.

Then they closed, rolling over and over on the ground, battering, biting, kicking, and clawing. But the strength was going out of their blows, and they were both sobbing with rage and hate. Ollie found Blackbelly's ear, biting deep into it. Blackbelly tore half the shirt from Ollie's back.

Then, hardly knowing why, Ishky began to kick Blackbelly wherever he could. Blackbelly screamed, roared with rage, and Ishky brought his fist squarely into the colored boy's face. For a moment, he loosened his hold on Ollie, and Ollie slammed his head back onto the concrete. Ishky stamped down on his belly.

Blackbelly roared with rage. "I'll killa bot'!" he screamed.

Then Ollie slammed his head onto the concrete again. Ishky drove a shoe into his thigh.

"Goddamn ya!"

"Killim!" Ishky yelled hysterically.

By main strength, Blackbelly struggled to his feet, tore himself loose, and all three stood panting and staring at each other. Then Ollie saw two more colored boys running toward them, their bands full of ashes and bottles.

"Beatit, Ishky!" he cried.

Together, the two of them fled up the street, the colored boys after them. Sobbing and laughing they ran until they had reached Ollie's house, where they plunged into the hallway. No safety there. On into the cellar, into the coalbin, where, panting and crying they perched on top of a pile of coal.

"Whatta fight!" Ollie sobbed.

"Geesus!"

"I beatis ass offana him!"

"Sure."

"Geesus!"

"Geesus!"

Ishky gulped to halt his sobs, and then he whispered, "Tink dey'll come down here?"

"Naw."

"Dey dunno where we are?"

"Naw."

Ishky began to laugh, almost hysterically. "Boy-o-boy," he chuckled, "whatta fight dat was! Geesus, I jus hope dey come down here, wid all dis coal. Geesus, I'd liketa swat dat nigger in duh eye wid a lumpa coal."

Ollie appeared to be lost in thought absently rubbing the blood from his face with his arm. Through the dusk of the coal bin, he was staring at Ishky--thinking. Perhaps it was there that he first concretely thought of the gang.

"Hey, Ishky," he said.

"What?"

"How dya jump offana duh roof?"

"Oh--jus' like dat."

"Geesus--"

"Yeah."

"Betcha it took a lotta guts."

"I dunno," Ishky said.

"Betcha it did. I wouldn' have duh guts."

"Well, I was scared at first."

"Was ya?"

"Yeah. But now I'd do it agin jus' like dat."

"Yeah?"

"Sure."

MAYBE YOU can understand how I felt, sitting there with Ollie like that. I had forgotten Marie; I had forgotten the garden and dreams, and everything else --because I was happy. Oh, you can hardly understand how happy I was.

I hurt. Oh yes, but what are hurts, when they pass so quickly? And Ollie is my friend. I know that. And if you ask me how I know it, I won't be able to tell you. But I have lived here on the block all the time, and this is the first time Ollie has ever been my friend. Maybe you will think that I hated Ollie, but that is wrong. Who can hate Ollie? I sit in the coal bin, and I tell Ollie how I leaped from the roof. I can see that it impresses him. Well, we are friends, and who knows what we can't do together. Anyway, it is better than being a friend of Shomake's.

## **THIRTEEN**

IF THERE WAS HATE, WAS THERE NOTHING ELSE IN THE world? Why had Ishky refused to speak to him? Shomake wandered up the block, lost in a misery that was as deep as the sewers under his feet. He had no friend, no companion, nothing at all; and why live?

He went into the store. Dim and soft and quiet, smelling of the fresh-cut leather, the store always seemed to welcome him. His father did not even look up. How the old man sat there, hammering and hammering! No fears there, nothing but a great confidence in the repairing of shoes. Shomake envied him.

And the back room was even darker than the store, all pungent and smelling of Italian food. The spaghetti lay in soft coils in the pot on the stove. Tiptoeing over, Shomake put his finger into the

warm water, tasting a bit. Ah, it was good! He looked for his mother--but she had gone somewhere. He took out the fiddle, holding it in his arms. Beautiful fiddle, of red and brown wood, gleaming with the soul inside of it. He caressed it, smoothed it over with his fingertips. But he didn't want to play--not now.

He sat in the dark, moving his fingers back and forth, quiet and comfortable. Here--no one would bother him, ever. If he could stay here all the time--

He thought of the garden. Surely some way to get into it; there were ways and ways. If you were to speak anxiously enough, wouldn't a door open in the fence? Perhaps a very small door. Then you could creep through, carefully, and you would be in the garden--for good. Oh, why had Ishky ever told him of the garden? Now he would have no peace, and if the garden were only a story of Ishky's? What then?

Ishky--well, maybe when Ishky was tired of Marie, he would come back. There was no one quite like Ishky.

On his way out of the store, Shomake stopped again to look at his father. What was there about shoes that could make a man aware of nothing else in the world? Once, he had asked his mother, and she said to him, "In the old country--it was different."

He went out of the house, walking slowly up the block toward the avenue. Already, he was forgetting what had happened before, yet he had thought that he would never forget.

Two blocks east there were open fields and lots, and beneath them and away were the misty houses of the city. Shomake went down, climbing slowly, until he came to a held that was full of grass and tall weeds. Before him, the water tower stood up like a narrow giant, and beyond the water tower the elevated trains crawled slowly into their barns.

He lay upon his back, chewing the stems of grass, and he forgot without ever knowing that he was forgetting.

## **FOURTEEN**

AS MARIE RAN AWAY FROM THE FIGHT, SHE BEGAN TO sob, and by the time she had reached the security of her stoop, she was crying bitterly. She ran into the hall.

She was afraid of the hall. When she went down into a cellar, for the terrible thrill of bad, she was afraid, but it was nothing like this fear of the hall. The hall was dark-green, lit by one single jet of gas. When she opened the door, the jet leaped, and shadows danced toward her and away. Crying, she crouched just inside of the door. Then she crept toward the stairs, crept up them. When her mother opened the door for her, she fell into her arms, lay there, sobbing and twitching.

Her mother was a thin Italian woman, with dark eyes and dark stringy hair. She spoke no English at all. Now, her eyes closed, the soft and beautiful Italian was a comfort to Marie.

"What is it, my little one?"

"I'm afraid."

"Of what? Of what?"

She took Marie into a front room, where there was more light. She sat with her in an old rocking chair, rocking back and forth and back and forth.

"What is there to be afraid of, my little one?" she asked in her soft Italian. Marie wept abundantly.

"You have done nothing, my heart, so what is there to be afraid of?"

Marie told her--in broken words.

"In the cellar?"

"Yes."

The Italian woman rocked, back and forth, back and forth, nodding her head stiffly, touching the blonde skin with her fingertips.

Marie whispered, "In the hall--I saw the devil."

"No, no."

"I'll never go back there ... to the street."

"Don't you know, my little one, how God cares for children? God will punish the barbarian; but the laughter of children is music in His ears. You are innocent."

"I saw the devil."

"No, no. You see, we are in a land of barbarians, my child.. ."

Marie saw that her mother was crying too; she saw more than that. She saw past the line that separated her world from her mother's. And because she knew that she would go down to the cellar again, she wept with her mother.

## **FIFTEEN**

I HAVE TOLD YOU A LOT ABOUT THE BLOCK, AND I WILL tell you some more; but not too much. If I tell you too much, you will not believe; if I call my story The Children, you will raise your brows--because there are no such children in the world. But aren't there? What do you know about children? And what do children know about the other world, where you work--and try to pay your rent? But are the worlds so different? If once tall men were what we were then--then have men changed? I don't know. But in the end, after I have told you all about Shomake's fiddle, about what happened to Blackbelly, I will tell you of Ollie, and maybe a little about Thomas Edison.

YOU WILL ADMIT that being a friend of Ollie's is better than being Shomake's friend. I don't have to be afraid any more. But that is not all. Oh no, don't for a moment believe that I, Ishky, am that dull. You see, I Know Ollie. Can anybody know Ollie better than I do Ollie is a fighting machine, but he is not at all the kind of a machine Blackbelly is; he is all nerves and emotion. And in my way, without thinking too much, I decide that I will play on that. Now this is how it all came about.

In the dark coal bin, I know Ollie is thinking. I am thinking, too....

"Geesus, whatta fight!" Ollie says, "Duh whole block's lousy wid niggers."

I agree with Ollie. "Black basteds."

"We oughta have a gang." That's what Ollie says, and I know he's not sure of himself. If he were sure of himself, would he confide in me?

"It oughta be yer gang," I say.

"Dam tootin'."

"Betcha you could lick anybody," I say.

"Dam tootin'."

Now my chance has come, and I go about it very craftily; oh, never fear--I am nobody's fool.

"Yuh gonna lemme in it, Ollie?" I want to know.

"You can' fight."

"I could makeya schemes, Ollie. I read a lotta books."

"Lookit duh way Blackbelly almost kilt yuh."

"Listen, Ollie," I tell him. "You an' me could have duh biggest gang aroun'. We could kick duh shid oudda any block."

"Yeah?"

"Sure, Ollie."

"We gotta git a gang."

"Yeah."

Thomas Edison saw Blackbelly and his gang chase Ollie and Ishky down the cellar. He ran across the street, taking refuge in front of the shoe store until the colored boys had gone. Then he crept into the hallway, down into the cellar, and he lay there, listening to Ishky's and Ollie's eager plans. The more they spoke, the more it appealed to him, and finally he could contain himself no longer.

"Hey, Ollie!"

"Geesus, who's dat?"

"Jus me."

"It's nuts."

"Git oudda here, loony!"

"Aw-Ollie."

"Screw, bughouse."

"Lemme in duh gang, Ollie. Ollie--"

Simultaneously, Ishky and Ollie fell on him, kicking him and beating him up into the hallway. Tearfully, Thomas Edison fell and stumbled up, fled then into the bright sunlight. Still stumbling, nodding his overlarge head from side to side, he made his way down to his house.

The wooden shack where they all lived was always dirty; there were three rooms, in which eight of them lived, Ollie and Thomas Edison, brothers and sisters, mother and father, and the grandmother. Thomas Edison hoped the grandmother would be there, but none of the others.

She sat knitting, a very old woman, a woman so old that she had forgotten the number of her years. She was good for nothing else now-except knitting. All day long she sat knitting.

Thomas Edison crept into the kitchen, blinking like a huge owl, his mouth gaping, the dampness of tears still clinging to his cheeks. He saw his grandmother knitting.

"Hey, Oloman," he muttered. They all called her that, and if it had meant anything once, they didn't know what it meant now.

"Dirt and filth," she rumbled, in her broad brogue, "and dirt and filth. Who has been beating you now, poor addlebrain? There's no mercy in them for the wonder God has put on you."

"Ollie kicked me."

"A swine's son. Wipe away the tears, poor fool."

"Awright, Oloman."

"And sit down by me."

"Yeah, Oloman." He sat down next to her, pressing his face to her skirt; and one of her withered hands left her knitting to drop and caress his hair. And all the time she stared straight ahead of her, to a small window where a broad slab of sunlight bit into the room. What an old woman she was, with a fine wrinkled, ancient face! She said:

"Tell me of it, poor fool."

88 "Dey kicked me. Whatta sock Ollie gimme, right on duh backa my head. He says, git oudda here, loony."

"Yes, poor fool."

He leaned back, staring up at her with his round face, blinking his eyes. He was straining for thought, for some sort of deep, wondrous thought that he could put into words. But the words came with difficulty.

"Oloman--whattam I loony fer?"

"What?"

"I'm crazy, huh?"

"Poor fool--poor fool, it is God's wish, and nothing else but that. But I cannot explain that to you. Dirt and filth here, but in the old country it would have been different. You see, God has put His wonderful touch on you."

"Yeah?"

"You're not understanding me, poor fool."

"What's God's touch?"

"Madness."

"Yeah?"

"He has made you mad for His own purpose, and for that reason they will torment you--torment you. Dirt and filth."

"Goddam em," he muttered.

"Yes, my child."

"Some day ... I'll kill Ollie."

"No."

He stared with implicit faith at the old woman's face, while she nodded and stroked his coarse hair. She nodded, muttered, and told him stories of a land of mountains and trolls. Madness is God's gift. Take heed of that then, Thomas Edison. Laugh at Ollie. Laugh at Ishky.

"My mother was mad," the old woman said.

"Yeah?"

"She roamed the bog, screaming to the birds--"

"Yeah?"

"When they torment you too much, poor fool, come back to me, and I will give you comfort, such as I know how."

"Yeah, Oloman."

## SIXTEEN

WHEN WE GOT OUT OF THE CELLAR, OLLIE AND I HAD ALL our plans made for forming the gang, and Ollie was all swelled up with it. We came out onto the stoop, and Ollie strutted back and forth, sticking out his chest.

"Geesus .. ." he said.

"Yeah, Ollie--oney we gotta git more kids."

"Yeah."

I sat down on the stoop, and I was feeling important myself, believe me, and I began to think of whom we could get. I was full of ideas about this and that, wondering what I would do in the first fight. Maybe I would be yellow, and maybe I wouldn't; but, anyway, nobody would beat me up anymore, not with Ollie on my side. Ollie was leaning up against one side of the stoop, rubbing a hand through his yellow hair, when I saw Kipleg.

Kipleg came down the block, half running, half walking. Mornings, Kipleg worked in a grocery, and he had gotten the job because he looked a lot older than his age. He was big, too, a good deal bigger than Ollie or Ishky.

Kipleg lived across the street from Ishky. A peculiar thing about Kipleg--he never went up the stairs to his apartment. He had his own way of going home.

Now Ollie and Ishky watched him. They wanted to call him, to tell him all about the gang, but not for anything would they have attracted his attention until he had gotten into his house. They watched him eagerly.

He came down the block, hitching up his pants. When he saw Ollie, he whistled to him; but he didn't stop. His quick walk lengthened into a run, and then a monkeylike bound placed him on top of his stoop. Whistling, he crouched there.

"Watchim," Ollie whispered.

"Yeah."

Kipleg leaped for the low ladder that hung from the fire escape, and the moment he caught it, swinging from it by his hands, his mother put her head out of the window. Kipleg's mother was a large woman, with red hair, and most of the time she was drunk. He had no father; nobody knew anything about his father, whether he had died, or whether he had gone off somewhere. But his mother drank, maybe to forget his father. When she wasn't drunk, she took men into the house. Now she screamed at Kipleg.

"Git offana dere, yuh liddle bum!"

"Gwan," yelled Kipleg.

"Git off, I say!"

Kipleg swung up his feet, caught them in the ladder, and then hung swaying. Slowly, he raised his body.

"Yuh liddle tramp," his mother screamed, "cantcha come intuh duh house like a gennleman? Yer duh disgrace of my life."

"Aw, screw," Kipleg said. He began to climb up the ladder, sticking out his chest, and hanging back by his hands. When he had crossed the fire escape, come to the window, his mother smacked him soundly. He tried to smack her back, but she caught him by the pants, and drew him through the window, screaming curses at him all the time.

Ollie and Ishky stared fascinated, their mouths wide open. And everyone else on the block stared too, some laughing and delighted. Through the open window came the sounds of the battle between Kipleg and his mother.

"Scum! Oh, dat I shoulda had duh pains of labor fer a liddle tramp like you!"

"Aw, screw, I tol' yuh!"

Talkin' to yer mudder like dat. Take it!"

"Ohhh, yuh louse!"

"Call me a louse!"

"Lemme go!"

"Dere-dere-dere!"

"Whore!"

"I'll kill ya."

"Lemme go, djya hear! Lemmego, yuh lousy ol' basted! Who djya tink yer smackin?"

Kipleg came out of the window again, this time backwards. He ran across the fire escape to the ladder, and then turned to look at his mother, who was in the window again.

"Scum!" she cried.

But now Kipleg was free, and he hung upon the ladder, screaming at her, and making faces, like a monkey.

"Hey, Kipleg!" Ollie yelled.

Seeing Ollie, he dropped quickly down the ladder, hung a moment, and then dropped to the stoop. Putting his hands in his pockets, ignoring his mother who still screamed from the window, he swaggered across the street.

"Hey, Ollie," he said.

"Geesus, yuh got duh ol' lady goin' den," Ollie said admiringly.

"Yeah."

"Geesus," Ishky said, because he had to say something.

"Yeah."

Kipleg sat down on the stoop, glanced at Ishky, and then spat. "I don' like sheeneys," he said.

"He's awright," Ollie explained.

"He's yella."

"Noeeain'."

Fearfully, Ishky watched, wondering what would be the outcome of this, but Kipleg was in a good mood. Out of his pocket he fished a package of cigarettes, and he offered them first to Ollie and then to Ishky. They all lit up, and they sat upon the edge of the stoop, puffing. It was the first time Ishky had ever tried a cigarette, and he puffed hesitantly. But Ollie and Kipleg inhaled with great calm and delight.

"Good butts," Ollie said, cocking his head to one side, and looking at the cigarette he held in his fingers.

"Yeah," Kipleg agreed.

"Yeah," Ishky said.

"Go ahead--inhale."

"I am" Ishky said.

They leaned back, crossed their legs, and then Ollie told Kipleg about the gang.

"We're gonna beat duh niggers?" he explained.

"Yeah, we're gonna kick duh shid oudda dem," Ishky said. "We're gonna git Blackbelly."

"Yeah."

"I gotta have some gang fer dat," Kipleg said thoughtfully. "Dey'd git duh niggers from Eight Avenya, an' yuh'd have tuh have some gang fer dat."

"Well gitta gang," Ollie said. "Jews, an' wops an' everythin'."

"Yeah--"

That was how the peace came about, the truce that for a short time united ail factions against Blackbelly and his followers. Ishky was in it. From the beginning, it had been Ishky's plan, and Ishky knew that he was in it for good. Now they could use the weak, and it made no difference that he could not fight as well as Ollie or Kipleg.

SO THEN, YOU see how, I, Ishky, am in the seventh heaven of delight. Suddenly, I have become a man. What became of all this, I will tell you later, but now you must see how I became a man.

I sit on the stoop, smoking a cigarette with Ollie and Kipleg. Is it the same Ishky who dreamed dreams about a secret garden? Now I can laugh at that. Gardens--Ollie is my friend, and Kipleg is my friend, too, and I am full of hate against Blackbelly and the rest of the lousy niggers. I know what we will do to the niggers.

The cigarette burns and stings. Well, what of that? It is better to be this way, than the way I used to be. I am sure I will never be that way again.

## SEVENTEEN

PERHAPS YOU SEE BY NOW HOW THROUGH ALL OF THIS there runs the memory of the secret garden. I can't forget it so easily. What is the use of trying to make me, Ishky, over in one day? I am Ishky, who never was much good for anything, except to dream, and here I am one of the leaders of a gang.

And it has all come about in less than one day--that is what makes it so impossible. It is not more than two o'clock in the afternoon now, when we all sit on my stoop, smoking cigarettes, and very proud of it, too. If the gang was born anywhere, it was born there. What then? My mother puts her head out of the window, way out, and sees me there.

"Ishky!"

Kipleg giggles, and Ollie glances sidewise at me. But I pretend not to have heard, I go on smoking my cigarette, though I know well enough what a beating I am in for.

"Ishky, come op!"

"Teller t'go take a--" Kipleg says.

"Yeah," says Ollie.

Where has my manhood gone, all of a sudden? The cigarette has become very limp in my hand, and I cower back against the stoop. What will my mother do to me? I want to throw away the cigarette, which has made me a little sick already, but I haven't enough courage for that. I look at Ollie and at Kipleg, and they are both grinning.

"Come up, Ishky!"

"Teller tuh screw," Ollie says.

"Maybe I oughta find out what she wants," I say, trying to pass it off easily.

"I tolya he was yella," Kipleg says.

"Like hell I am."

My mother is leaning far out of the window, and by now I can see how red her face is getting. If she leans out just a little more, she will fall. Well, maybe it would be best for me to go upstairs--

I rise very slowly, looking at Kipleg, looking at Ollie. In all my life, there has been no more shameful moment than this. How I hate my mother! How I hate everything! But, nevertheless, I stamp out my cigarette. And all the time Ollie and Kipleg are grinning and grinning.

"Maybe I'll jus' go up fer a minute," I say.

"G'wan-yella."

"I'll be right down."

"G'wan."

What is the use? I have lost out here and everywhere, and when I get upstairs, my mother will beat me. When I go into the hall, I am already feeling the blows, and as I walk up the stairs, I shiver. I want the sunlight back, the warm comfort of the stoop. Crouching, I make my way up the narrow stairway, up two flights to our floor. My mother is standing by the door, waiting for me.

Well, there is no wonder like this.

Instead of hitting me, she clasps me in her arms, holds me close to her, moving her hands softly back and forth over my body. I cringe, but she is kissing me, and it seems to me that I am falling deep, deep into her large, soft body. Her red, broad face is close to mine.

We go into the house, and in Yiddish she says to me, "Oh, my dear one, your mother was afraid!"

"Nuttin' tuh be afraid of."

"I could see you again--plunging from the roof. Oh, my heart, will you ever know what you are to your mother?"

"I wanna go down."

"Yes, yes, my heart, I would not keep you out of the fresh air and the sunshine. Only stay with your mother for just a while. You hurt her when you consort with gentile swine. Why must you go to them, my child?"

"Dere awright."

"No--they are heathens and sons of heathens."

Then she takes me into the kitchen, prepares a huge slice of bread for me, piling jam high upon it, and it all looks too fine for me to resist. Anyway, it is almost time for me to go for my Hebrew lessons, so what have I to lose? I sit down in one corner, munching upon the bread, and licking the jam whenever it is smeared over my lips. The kitchen is quiet and clean and cool, and presently my mother goes out, leaving me alone. When I have finished the bread, I am full and content.

"Go and learn, small heart," my mother calls out from the next room.

Well, I am glad to get out, and I dash through the dark hall to the sunshine, where I stand blinking. But Ollie and Kipleg are gone. Slowly, I walk to the cellar on the next block, where I receive lessons in Hebrew.

Is everything gone from me already? As I go down the stairs, I find that I am dreamy and lazy. In the dim, poorly lit room, there are three or four boys seated at a long table. At one end, the old man sits, beating time with his ruler. Graybeard blinks at me, motioning me to my place, and I read with the others, singsong, and graybeard beats time.

I am sleepy, and as I watch the black letters in front of me, I grow more and more sleepy.

"Ishky!" graybeard snaps. The stick leaps forward, catching my ear, and I bend to my reading. "Has the heathen put lead in your brain? Read!" I read and I read. What else can I do, here in a cellar, where I learn a strange tongue? But I try to think of Ollie--of Kipleg--

The boy next to me jabs me with a pin, and I screech. Suddenly all four of us are doubled in

laughter, and graybeard is in a rage.

"Swine! Murderers!"

We read, bending close to our books.

And now I am thinking of Marie. How is that? Here, my heart goes out to her, and my love comes back to me, stronger than ever before. Marie, how I want you! But I am just poor Ishky.

"Ishky!"

"Yeah-yeah-"

Yellow hair is gold in the sunshine, and if I hold Marie in my arms, I have everything I want. Would Ollie understand that? Would Kipleg? Would old graybeard?

Marie is a wop. Then it is a sin to think of her in this place--but what a delicious sin! I am warm and happy inside, with the dreams I am making of Marie.

(I love you, I love you, I love you-)

"Ishky, addlebrained fool," graybeard barks.

"Yeah."

"Attention to your reading. Ah, what heathens you have become--all of you."

But I want to be out of here, old graybeard. Don't you understand that? Outside, there is sunshine and life, and what do you know of sunshine and life, holed up here in your cellar? I am Ishky, learning how to live. ...

Has there ever been a person as happy as I am, when I go out into the sunshine? I leap and jump, and scream at the top of my lungs, and inside of me I feel a warm kinship with everything that is alive.

I skip and run back to the block. New things now. The gang is waiting.

But nobody is there. Anyway, the sunshine is warm and good and comfortable, and I sit down on my stoop. I stretch out my legs, turning my face up to the heat. How happy I am! How content!

## **EIGHTEEN**

MARIE SHOOK THE SUNLIGHT FROM HER HAIR, AND HER hair spilled it to the pavement. And if Ishky had been mistaken in all other things, he was not mistaken in her beauty. She was beautiful as the sunlight, and if they two were the only beautiful things upon the block, still it was enough.

In the sunlight she wasn't afraid, only in the dark. She threw her hair from her face, walked back and forth in front of her stoop. She even dared to throw a glance across the street, where Ollie sat with Kipleg, watching her slyly.

"Geesus," Ollie whispered.

"Whatsa matter?"

"Geesus, I gotta feel like a million bucks oudda Marie. I tooka down duh cellar."

"Yer fulla crap."

"Cross my heart. Listen, Kipleg. I says tuh her, wanna come down duh cellar? an' she says, what fer? An' I says, oh-jus' like dat-an' she says, naw, an' I says, come on down duh cellar an' see what I got. So I givea some immies--"

"G'wan."

"Cross my heart!"

"Whatcha do?"

"Felt aroun' unner her dress."

"Dat's all?"

"Geesus--I din' have much time."

"Yuh stink!" "Well, if I woulda had more time--"

Kipleg said, "Betcha she wouldn' go on down dere witcha agin. Betcha any money she wouldn'--"

"Betcha she would."

"Well, lemme see."

Ollie glanced across the street to Marie; then he glanced back at Kipleg. He looked at Kipleg pleadingly.

"Geesus, Kipleg, how'm I gonna leddy see?"

Kipleg nodded triumphantly. "Dere. I knew yuh was fulla crap."

"Well, yuh ain' gonna call me fulla crap."

"Well, show me."

"How?"

"I'll go down duh cellar. Den you gitta tuh go down duh cellar witcha."

"Awright--"

Kipleg slipped into the hall, and then Ollie sat alone, leaning back with assumed boredom. Sometimes he would glance sidewise at Marie, but most of the time he simply stared at the ground. He wondered how long it would take for Marie to notice him, to cross the street; and somehow he knew that she would cross the street. But he wasn't eager to go down into the cellar now. In one way or another, Kipleg had tricked him into this.

Marie stopped her pacing. There was Ollie, sitting across the street, but hardly noticing her at all. Well that was a way Ollie had, and she tossed back her head, to show that it meant nothing to her. Now that he had had a fight with Blackbelly, Ollie was probably all swelled up.

Ollie took out some immies, rolling them from one hand to the other. He couldn't get her with that same old immie trick.

"Hey, Marie!"

She tilted her head saucily, then turned her back upon him.

"Awright--"

She glanced at him again, walked over to the curb, and felt at the gutter daintily with one foot. There was no denying that Ollie was nice to look at.

"Wanna see sumpen?"

"Naw." She fled back to the stoop, seating herself there, crossing her legs.

"Awright--"

She hesitated, tilted her head again, and then called, "Whaddya got?"

"Sumpen."

"What?"

"C'mon over an' see."

She rose, took a few steps toward him, turned back, turned again and crossed the street. Ollie sat where he was, indifferent.

"Whaddya got?"

Ollie yawned, stretched his arms. "Got it down du cellar."

"Yeah-I know." She backed away.

"Aw, c'mon--"

"Naw, you Ollie."

"Jus dis once."

"Naw."

"Well, c'mon intuh duh hall."

She hesitated. The street was empty, warm, deserted; it promised no amusement, and what harm could come to her if she went into the hall with Ollie? It wasn't like the cellar.

They went into the hall, slowly, and once inside Marie shrank apprehensively against Ollie. Here it was dark again, with the flickering flame of the gas jet. Why did she go into the darkness, when she had hated it so?

"Whaddya 'fraid of?" Ollie wanted to know.

"It's so dark here."

"Well, I'm here."

"Yeah."

They sat down in the darkness under the steep, wooden, carpeted stairs, and Ollie put his arm around her. She shrank away, but it seemed to her that the darkness reached out from the other side to grasp her. Then Ollie's hand crept under her dress. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't; she couldn't make any sound at all, and she trembled with fear. Then she attempted to think her fear into anticipation and thrill. Ollie's hand

crept farther up beneath her skirt.

"Don'," she whispered.

"Why?" "I dunno-jus' don'."

"Why?"

"Well-yer hurtin' me."

"I ain'."

"Yuh are."

His hand crept between her warm legs, clamping the flesh and pinching it. Her body became gooseflesh all over, and she trembled violently. She tried to think of her mother, and could only think about how sick she was getting. She closed her eyes, opened them; but all around her was darkness and nothing else. She thought of how it was out on the street, all warm sunlight and warm stone.

"Lemme go," she whispered.

"Geesus," Ollie said, "whaddy a'fraid of? I ain' gonna hurtcha, Marie. Hones, tuh God, I ain'. Look, I'm takin' my hand away. Dere."

"Less go back in duh street," she whimpered.

"Geesus, whatsa matter witcha, anyway?"

"Nuttin'."

"Well, stay here, den."

Marie heard a noise, and her terror increased tenfold. She shrank against Ollie, shrank away from him then, and with a great, enfolding grasp, the blackness reached out for her. She thought of hell and devils and punishment, and she thought of her mother, whimpering now.

"Aw, stop cryin'."

"Awright."

"Geesus, I never saw sucha baby."

"Awright."

A hand was creeping under her dress again, pinching the flesh that was now hard with pimples. Stifling a scream, she grasped Ollie's arm.

"Don'."

"Geesus, I ain' doin' nuttin'!"

"Y'are."

"I ain'--so help me God. Look--dere's my hands."

But under her dress the hand still caressed her. If it wasn't Ollie, what was it? Dumb with fear, she tried to move, but could not. And then, in front of her, Kipleg burst out laughing.

"Yuh dumb basted!" Ollie yelled.

"Whaddya 'fraid of, Marie?"

"Geesus, yer dumb as hell. Watcha wanna spoil duh whole thing fer?"

"Aw, screw."

But now Marie was sobbing violently, thrusting her fists into her mouth, shaking her head back and forth. Actually, she was in a state of hysteria, and Ollie and Kipleg, half laughing, half frightened, fled.

But Marie sat there in the dark, sobbing. Now, perhaps, the creatures of darkness were reaching out for her; let them reach then, let them have her. She sat there, and cried.

How long she sat there, crying, she didn't know; but when the shame had passed, the fear returned. Like a small, frightened animal, she crept out of the dark into the sunshine. And there, on the stoop, was Ishky.

THE SUN and the light and the day are the time for love. They are the time for dreams and fancies and happiness; and isn't it strange that I, Ishky, am returning to all that? I sit here on the stoop, not too much on my mind, dreaming.

How is it with dreams? How is it with gardens? If there is a magic garden, and not in one place, then surely it is in another. So if I go off with Marie, isn't it quite possible that together we will find that garden? Not ash heaps, but a real garden, with flowers that smell--

And I turn around, and there is Marie, looking at me.

"Marie!"

I look at her, and I am sure that my eyes and my face are filled with love. All the love that is inside of Ishky is written there. (Marie, look at me! Do you see the great love that fills my heart?)

But there is an expression upon her face that I have never seen before, and she is trembling all over.

I don't know why.

"Marie!"

"Oh--you--"

"Marie!"

Suddenly, screaming with rage, she leaps at me, beats at my face, claws at me, and then runs away, crying bitterly.

Well, I am only Ishky, and if I understand some things, I don't understand everything. I don't understand this. I can only sit on the stoop, looking after her, and wondering.

## NINETEEN

YOU SEE THE WAY IT IS WITH ME NOW; AND HOW AM I to account for Marie? I watch her run into her house, and then I shake my head. Some things simply are, and that is all there is to it.

Here are Kipleg and Ollie, and I am instantly on the alert when I see them. I will have to hold on to what honor I have won. They will remind me of my mother. So my small head is full of things, of Marie, and of what to say to Kipleg and Ollie.

Together, griming at some deep secret they held between them, Kipleg and Ollie came swaggering down the block, arm linked in arm. They saw Ishky, and they made for him.

"Hey, sheeney," Kipleg called good naturedly.

Ollie was still bubbling inside. In the scene with Marie in the hall, there had been deep drama and deeper humor; and for some reason it struck him as woefully funny. He wanted to laugh outright, to tell Ishky what he had done.

"Hullo," Ishky nodded.

"Where's yer mamma?"

"I don' need her," Ishky said indignantly.

"Yeah--"

"Yeah--"

"Yer yella of her."

"I ain'."

"You stink, sheeney."

"Aw, leavim alone," Ollie said.

"Some gang, wid him in it."

"I ain' yella." Ishky said.

"Aincha?"

"Naw."

"Well, why doncha show it, why doncha?"

"Awright."

"Why doncha?"

"Awright. Geesus, gimme a chance, willya?"

"C'mon."

Don't ask me how the idea came to me. I don't know how it came to me. But put yourself in my place, with the need of keeping face in front of Ollie and Kipleg. What would you have done? You see, I want you to know how things had been leading up to this, and later to that other thing, of which I will tell presently. But about this. I must explain to you why I did it, if I can explain. The reason is--I had to hold up my face in front of Ollie and Kipleg. Maybe you don't understand that, but that's the reason.

I thought of Shomake's fiddle. I don't know why I thought of Shomake's fiddle all at once instead of anything else; but maybe it was because I could never forget the wonder of it. Even the secret garden was not as splendid as this beautiful fiddle.

And when I thought of it, I began to sweat all over. It's very funny when you sweat like that-- and know you are sweating. In little bubbles, the sweat crept out of my skin, and I felt it run down my cheeks.

(Forget, Ishky--and don't tell them! Ollie doesn't know, and Kipleg doesn't know, so why do you have to tell them anything at all about it?)

How hot the sun is! How hot the ground is, under my feet. My eyes dart up and down the block, and I see the stiff, straight walls of the houses, baking under the sun. I am baking like that, and presently I will be cooked--entirely cooked.

Shomake's fiddle--

"Geesus Christ," Ollie says.

"Awright, awright, yuh jus' wait fer me at duh corner. Jus' wait dere."

"Whaddya gonna do?" Kipleg wants to know.

"You'll see."

So I am about to do it. And why? Because I must impress Kipleg and Ollie. But what harm will come to the fiddle? Over, across the street in Shomake's store, it is dim and quiet. I steal in softly from the sunlight, wondering whether Shomake is there. If he is there, then the whole business is off. The old man sits behind the counter, hammering, and paring leather; he does not even look up. I knew he would not look up, and I steal past him into the dark back room.

Ah, what smells there are in this place of Shomake's, what good Italian smells, what hot, meaty smells! It is quiet, dismal, and from outside, I hear the tap, tap, tap of the hammer. But I haven't forgotten what I came for. I must hurry; back there, Ollie is waiting for me, and Kipleg is waiting.

There, in its case, I see the fiddle. Now I am trembling. I pick it up, hesitate, and then run from the store. But Shomake's father does not even look up, sitting there with his great shaggy gray head bent over his awl.

I have the fiddle case clutched under my arm, and I run up to the corner. Ollie sees me.

"Geesus!" he gasps.

"Geesus," Kipleg says.

And then we all three run like mad. We run east, down the slope to the river, where there are empty lots and trees. But now I am trembling and shivering. What kind of a fool have I been? What will happen to the fiddle now--?

The three of them, Ollie, Ishky, and Kipleg stopped in an empty lot. They made a circle, crouching with their hands on their knees, and they stared at the fiddle case as it lay on the ground between them.

"I'm gonna open it," Kipleg said.

"Like hell yuh are. I'm gonna."

"Lemme," Ishky pleaded.

"Lay off it."

"Awright, lemme now."

"Geesus, yuh dumb sheeney basted!"

Ollie, awing the other two, knelt and opened the case. There inside, rich, warm, shining, and splendid, lay the fiddle. For a moment, all three of them stared fascinated at the rich red-and-brown wood. Then they all grabbed at it.

Ollie had the fiddle, Kipleg the bow. Ishky was struggling with Ollie for the fiddle, when Ollie pushed him in the face, sitting him abruptly upon the ground.

"On yer ass!"

"Lemme play, Ollie? Kipleg screamed, 'lemme play!'"

"Me first."

"Geesus, Ollie, jus' lemme touch it once. I ain' goin' tuh run away wid it."

"Gimme dat!"

"Geesus, Ollie--"

"Yuh gonna give it t'me?--"

"Awright, awright--"

"Lemme play, willya, Ollie?" Ishky pleaded.

"Gimme a chance, willya?"

Now with fiddle and bow, Ollie struck a pose. He made a mock bow, sweeping his handsome yellow head from side to side. Then he waved the bow through the air, like a wand; then he struck it to the fiddle, the strings screaming like a cat in pain. Making a face, he began to slide the bow back and forth; and then the pained expression upon his face turned to one of deep pleasure.

"Geesus," Kipleg whispered.

"Dere. Maybe yuh tought I couldn' play on duh thing?"

"Lemme," Ishky pleaded.

"Awright, awright. But Kipleg comes next."

"Geesus, who got duh fiddle?"

"Awright--nobody says yuh not gonna play."

Grinning with delight, Ollie swayed from side to side, forcing sound out of the violin. And then Ishky and Kipleg could stand it no longer. Together, they made a grab at the fiddle; all three rolled over the ground, the fiddle clenched between them. For a moment, there was a mass of squirming, screaming bodies; then, one by one, they detached themselves.

The fiddle lay on the ground, crushed and splintered. The strings were all broken, the sides broken, and there was a great hole where someone had put his foot through the middle of it.

Ishky stared at it, stared and stared at the poor wreckage.

"Now look whatcha done," Ollie said.

"Boy, yer dumb as hell," Kipleg exploded. Whatcha wanna do dat fer?"

Ishky shook his head, staring at them dumbly. "But I din'--"

"Yuh did so."

"We sawim, din' we, Ollie. Geesus, Ishky!"

"No--no--no!"

"Geesus, whaddya so yella about? We ain' gonna snitch onya, are we, Kipleg?"

"Shid, no."

BUT WHAT difference does that make? There, all broken up on the ground, lay the fiddle. But it couldn't be called a fiddle now, broken as it was.

What have I done? What will I say when they find me out? Then I will have to confess that I stole the fiddle, smashed it to pieces.

"But how c'n I bring it back?" I plead.

"Leddit go."

"Sure. Geesus, Ishky--whaddya 'fraid of, anyway?"

"Aw-nuttinn"

There is no use picking it up, for even I know that such a pile of broken wood can never be repaired. I let it lie where it is, and with Ollie and Kipleg I walk back to the block.

They are still laughing and joking between themselves. Well, for them that's all right; they never heard Shomake play on his fiddle. But what will I do? What will I do if Shomake asks me about it? If he asks me where his fiddle is, what will I say?

"Listen, Ishky, Ollie says to me, when we are back on the block, "from now on, yer in duh gang."

"Yeah," Kipleg says.

"We ain' goin' tuh snitch."

"Yeah."

But all I want now is to get away from them, and I am glad when they leave me alone on my stoop. Out of all grand dreams, nothing is left--nothing. I am Ishky--but I have nothing now.

I sit in a bundle on my stoop, my head in my hands, and I hardly notice how it is down at the bottom of the block, where the sun is beginning to lower, where all the houses are taking on a rosy glow. Evening is coming.

Someone sits down next to me. Glancing sidewise, I see that it is Thomas Edison. He has some sorrow of his own, and I don't mind him sitting next to me. It seems to me again, that there is some sort of a bond between us.

Warm stone--and warm night air. As the day passes, I am alone, full of wonder and doubt. What are you anyway, Ishky?

Dreams will not come back--

See how the sun sets--

## TWENTY

EVENING COMES, AND THE SUN FADES. FROM WHERE I sit, from the edge of the house, a long shadow creeps out into the street; and I know that soon it will be dark.

Everyone has gone except Thomas Edison, and he sits next to me in silence, his large head drooping forward. He doesn't speak to me, and I don't speak to him; I don't want to speak. I only want to sink into my misery, as deep as I can.

And then, my mother puts her head out of the window. "Ishky!"

Why doesn't she leave me alone? Why must I bring my misery upstairs to her?

"Ishky!"

"Awright."

"Right away!"

"Awright."

Why am I afraid to go upstairs? Maybe I am afraid to leave Thomas Edison, but I don't know why that should be so.

From the shadows of the shoe repair place across the street, a small shadow detached itself, hesitated, and then moved over the gutter toward Ishky. Ishky watched it, with large sad brown eyes. "Hey, Ishky!"

"Hullo, Shomake." "Hullo."

Shomake sat down between Ishky and Thomas Edison. First he tightened the laces on his shoes. Then he stared straight ahead of him.

"Ishky?" "Yeah?"

"Yuh still saw at me?"

"Naw--I ain' saw. I wasn't never saw atcha, Shomake."

"I thought yuh was."

"Naw--"

They sat in silence again, three small figures, hunched over, wise and young and old as the world. They sat, while the sun sank behind the houses, to bring evening again. The heat was passing. From either end of the block, cool breezes stole. Voices, one by one, broke into the night, but the small figures paid no attention.

"Duh fiddle's gone," Shomake said finally.

Ishky looked at him. Thomas Edison said, "Why ya cryin', Shomake?"

"I ain'.

"Geesus," Ishky whispered.

Shomake got to his feet. He looked at Ishky and then he looked at Thomas Edison, and then he stared down at his feet.

"Well ..." he began.

"Listen, Shomake," Ishky said eagerly, "we gotta gang, Ollie an' Kipleg an' me. If y'wanna, yuh c'n git intuh it. I'll fix it."

"Yeah?"

"Sure--an' dat'll be a lotta fun."

"Yeah?"

"Sure."

"Awright." He turned hesitantly, and it seemed to Ishky then that he was afraid to go back to the store. Very slowly, Shomake walked to the curb.

"Well--so long, Ishky--"

"So long, Shomake."

"Seeya tumarra."

"Yeah."

"S'long."

"So long."

Shomake faded into the night, strange Shomake--

"Hey, Ishky," Thomas Edison said.

"Yeah?"

"C'n I git intuh duh gang?"

"Yeah-I guess."

"Geesus--"

They sat a while longer. A yellow cat came up to them, mewing, and it leaped into Thomas Edison's arms. He held it close to him, stroking it, whispering to it. Then he dropped it to the sidewalk, and it darted away.

"Well. . ."

Ishky turned around to look at Thomas Edison, who was standing now, his head drooping forward farther than ever.

"Goin' home?"

"Yeah."

"Well-s'long."

"So long."

AND I AM alone again now. My mother calls, "Ishky! Ishky! Ishky! Come opstes!"

"Awright!"

If she knew, she would leave me alone. I have done an awful thing, and I don't know why. Oh, if there were some reason, any reason, it would not be the way it is. But there is no reason. I took the fiddle, and I destroyed it.

If there is a God in heaven, what will he do to me? Or is this only the beginning? What is happening to me, Ishky?

I want to cry, the way Shomake was crying, but I can't. No, I can't cry.

I get up, and go into the hall. How dark--and dreary--and gloomy. Am I afraid of a dark hall now? Step by step, I go up. When I open the door, my mother folds her arms around me.

But no rest in that.

## **TWENTY-ONE**

MORNING COMES, AND ALL THINGS ARE FORGOTTEN--AT least for the time. I stretch, yawn, and wonder about the day, about yesterday. All things happened yesterday, the gang, the garden, and the fiddle. Then I turn over, burying my face in the covers. Why must the fiddle come back to me? I want to forget, but what will Shomake say to me?

"Ishky--Ishky!"

Out of bed. I pull my clothes on, glancing anxiously about the room. Small and dirty, but through the window, the sun is shining in. So that makes up for other things.

I guess that I am a fool. Otherwise would I have destroyed Shomake's fiddle? And now, this

morning, I want to find Shomake. I don't know what I want to say to him, but I want to talk to him, and maybe that will make it better.

"Ishky!"

"Awright, mama."

I lace my shoes. Even if they are falling to pieces, they will do for another day. Anything will do for today, a day full of sunshine and gladness.

My father has already gone away, but when I come into the kitchen, my mother stands and looks at me. Since I fell off the roof the day before, it seems that my mother cannot see enough of me. There she stands, big, ugly, and smiles at me. Why can't I love my mother as I should?

"Good morning, my heart," she says to me in yiddish.

"Hullo."

"Is my man ready for his breakfast?"

"Yeah-"

"Come, then."

I bolt my food. Indeed, it seems that I can never be out of the house quickly enough in the morning, when the sun is shining. Before I go, she holds me and kisses me.

"Take care of yourself."

"Yeah."

I go down the stairs, through the dim hall, and then I burst out into the street, stopping, suddenly, rolling myself in the warm sun. Nobody on the block; but who would be there this early? So I sit down on the stoop to bask in the sun.

Everything is fresh and clean that early in the morning. Do you know how that is? After I have sat there a while, I begin to feel full of the sun, and I stretch like a cat. I am sleepy again.

I watch Shomake's store. When he comes out, I will call him over, and tell him about the garden. You see, about this garden: if it is not in one place, then it is in another. The garden is somewhere, and even if I don't quite believe that, I will tell it to Shomake.

For Shomake, the night was long and bitter, and often he woke, to stare into the darkness and whimper. Once, his mother woke, and heard him.

"Peace, my child," she said in her warm Italian.

"I will never play again."

"Now--what nonsense is that? As sure as I live, I will buy you another fiddle. Am I too poor for that?"

"No, I'll never have another fiddle."

"Foolish child, sleep."

And she could hear him tossing and turning and twisting and whimpering.

"Child--child!"

"Yes--I am all right, never fear."

"Are you trying to cheer your mother now? Only sleep, and tomorrow I will have another fiddle for you.

"Yes."

But the night was long, endless, dreary, and out of the darkness figures rose to torment him.

Trembling, he crossed himself, drawing the blankets high over his head. Would sleep never come? And when sleep came, it brought dreams. And in his sleep, they took his fiddle from him. As often as he had another fiddle, it vanished.

He saw the way light creep into the room. "Wonderful light," he thought. Lying quietly, he saw his father rise, dress, go into the shop. Later, his mother called him.

"He, heart of hearts, do you see that the morning has come, after all?"

"Yes."

"And you see how foolish the fears of the night are. God takes care of the night as well as the day." Only, in her heart, she knew there was no money to buy him another fiddle.

"Mother--"

"Yes, my dear heart?"

"The new fiddle will be like the old one?"

"Yes, yes, my dear heart."

"You will buy it for me? You are not deceiving me, mother mine?"

"Deceiving my child?" His mother laughed, and then she bent over the stove to hide her face.

"Fiddles cost a lot?"

"Now are you one to worry about that--or is it my worry? Since when has my proud son taken it into his head to worry about money matters?"

He looked at her, and he managed to smile. Slowly, the smile spread over his small face, grew then, and presently they were both looking at each other, laughing.

"Eat, my child," she smiled.

Outside, the sun calls to all. The sun was so beautiful, that for a while he sat in the shadowed shop, just looking at it. Then, hesitantly, he opened the door, stepped outside.

The warm breeze crossed him, bathed him inside of it. Spreading his body, like a newly awakened bird, he walked toward Ishky. He grinned.

"Hey, Ishky!"

"Hey, Shomake!"

Grinning at each other, they came together, and together they walked over to the stoop, sat down. They stretched their legs, leaned back, looked into the sun for an instant, and then blinked their eyes. They were full of healthy animal pleasure. They stretched their arms, yawning.

"Whatta day!"

"Yeah."

"Hot."

"Yeah."

Then they heard someone scream, "Kip!"

Kipleg was making his exit through the window of his house, and with the screams of his mother, the block woke up. Ishky and Shomake stared eagerly.

"Watchim."

"Yeah."

Kipleg sprang out onto the fire escape, grabbed the ladder, and swung back and forth, like a

monkey. His mother leaned out, screaming curses. Then Kipleg dropped to the stoop, to the street, and darted up the block.

"Swine!" his mother screeched after him.

Ishky looked at Shomake, grinned. Their hands crept together. No matter how you took it, life was good.

"Wanna find duh gaden?" Shomake inquired.

"Duh gaden?"

"Yeah."

Ishky pursed up his lips, considered, and then nodded. "But it ain' back dere," he explained, nodding at the house.

"Somere else?"

"Yeah."

They rose, and they began to walk. Down toward the river, they walked, toward the fields and the open lots.

THERE IS no bitterness in my heart, no bitterness in Shomake's heart. If he knew that I had destroyed his fiddle, would it be any different? I don't know, but I know that I must be good to Shomake.

I will make it up to him. You see, we understand each other. We understand about the garden. Maybe there isn't any garden, and I think that we both know that. But nevertheless we go to find it. I am very close to Shomake now. But no more music--no more music-- Carefully I steer him away from the lot where the remains of his broken fiddle lie. I don't want him to see that. Perhaps if he saw it, I would have to tell him the truth.

It is not too long a way to the fields, but now we walk slowly, and it takes us some time. In the first held, we sit down, talk to each other. What do we speak about? Well, must one find things to speak about on a warm summer day?

We chase butterflies until we are out of breath, and then we sing ourselves full length upon the grass. We pull pieces of grass from the ground, draw them through our lips, and suck out the sweet juice. We are very happy.

Then we go on, climbing down the cliffs until we are at the river. The river flows away into a mist where we have never been, and we both think that the river is a very wonderful river. Some day we will go down there. Some day we will go to all places.

Then I break down the last barrier. I tell Shomake of my love for Marie. He listens, and he understands. He tells me about his new fiddle, which he will have soon. Now--isn't the world at our feet?

## **TWENTY-TWO**

WORD OF THE GANG CAME TO BLACKBELLY THROUGH many sources. His own gang was a more natural thing; dark skins herded together. And by twelve o'clock that day, when Ishky and Shomake were still down by the river, Blackbelly sat in the yard behind his house with eight or nine colored boys.

The white gang had formed. When Kipleg came back from work, he found Ollie, with four or five more boys. They drifted east, toward the lots, and by the time they reached the slope that led down toward the river, their number had almost doubled.

Now Blackbelly sat in his yard with the colored boys, making their weapons. Preparation was

simple. A long sock was filled with ashes and bits of glass; sand gave it weight, and then a knot was tied above the filling. Luxurious in the sun, the colored boys stretched and yawned, grinned. It would be a big fight.

Blackbelly sat apart. Short, broad, solid, they had only to look at him to be filled with a sense of their own strength. Blackbelly knew what he was about.

A short, thin boy, whom they called Fishface, grinned and hefted his stocking. "My," he said, "lookit dat."

"Dem white boys gonna git it."

"Yeah."

"We gonna mash dem up an' cut dere asses offana dem."

"Oh yeah."

"Lookee--lookee."

Blackbelly wondered-- Anyway, today was as good a day as any for the fight. Let it come; it had to come. He wasn't afraid. Hell, no, he was far from afraid. Only--

There was more to Blackbelly than to any of the others. He had a broad good head, wide eyes, and an endless expanse of brow. He fought because he had to fight, but sometimes he looked just a little ahead. He sat now, swinging his stocking from hand to hand, saying to himself, "Let it come, let it come."

"Hey--you Blackbelly."

He grinned, and he stood up. The rest stood up with him. Fishface danced from one side of the yard to the other, and a very small colored boy rolled about, hugging his knees. Blackbelly felt himself trembling--not with fear; only he hoped the fight would come soon.

"Goddammem," he muttered.

"Boy--well shid all over dem."

Ollie--Ollie, yellow hair and blue eyes, and the swagger that ruled the world. How he hated him! This time it would be Ollie and he, and for Ollie there'd be no way out of it. He looked at his feet, black toes coming out of broken shoes; torn breeches and a torn shirt. There wouldn't be much left of it; but in the same way he'd tear the clothes from Ollie. Ollie--Ollie, who was king--

"Geesus, c'mon," Fishface said.

"Whatsa matter, Blackbelly?" Cooly asked.

"Yeah?" the very small one said eagerly.

"Awright, awright--"

But Blackbelly stood there, thinking and thinking. Was he afraid then? He threw back his head, and began to laugh; he laughed until his whole body shook with it, until tears rolled down his dark flat cheeks.

"Geesus!"

Then he led the way toward the street, rolling now from side to side with his old swagger.

"Geesus, yeah."

And they followed him, in a close, compact, trusting group. Swinging their stockings, they went up the block, but Ollie's gang had already gone. At the corner, they stopped.

"Whereya goin', Blackbelly?" "Down tuh duh river."

"Tink dey'll be dere?"

"Sure."

They walked on, slowly, still in their compact battle group, Blackbelly, Fishface, Cooly--

And Blackbelly tried not to think. Down by the river, they would fight, and that was all. Why think? Only--

("Geesus, I'm scared.")

They didn't have to fight, they didn't have to fight. Only bow to Ollie, who was king. Crawl into alleys.

The weighted stockings swung from side to side--

## **TWENTY-THREE**

THEN LET THEM FIGHT.

Marie nodded to herself, stood like a small white elf, leaning against her stoop. But after they had gone, after both gangs had gone, the street was strangely empty. Empty and large and full of sun-- oh, enough to make her afraid.

Another girl came out of the house, and they sat down on the stoop to play jacks. The ball bounced and the bits of iron slithered back and forth. But Marie kept looking up, always looking up. She wondered why, because she hated Ollie.

She hated them all, Ollie and Ishky and Shomake and Kipleg. Now they would be beaten--

"Marie!" The other girl's name was Ruth.

"I don' wanna play no more."

"Why?"

Marie ran across the street, stopping by Ishky's stoop. Ishky would be better than nothing, but where was he? Carefully she ventured into the hall. Ruth came after her.

"Whaddya goin' in dere fer?"

"Oh, lemme alone."

They went back into the sunshine, stood there, Marie stamped her foot angrily.

"Whatsa matter?"

"Nuttin'."

"Whyya mad?"

"Oh, lemme alone."

Again she crossed the street, ran up the stoop and into her house. In the hall, she shivered; it was so dark. Step by step, she advanced to the stairs. Then she sat down on the stairs. Then, very softly, she began to cry. But she didn't know why she was crying.

She dried her eyes. She went back through the hall into the street. She went into the shoe repair shop. Cautiously, she stole into the back room. Only Shomake's mother was there. The woman smiled at Marie.

"Hello, lovely one," she said in Italian.

"Hello."

But today is no day for beauty to bloom within."

"There's no one to play with," Marie answered, speaking in the same tongue.

"And am I any better than the poorest company?" Marie smiled, and Shomake's mother went on with her work. Then, suddenly, Marie blundered into quick, trembling speech, in English.

"Listen, I know who took duh fiddle."

"What?" Shomake's mother turned around, very slowly; she stared at Marie.

"Ishky."

"What? But no--Ishky would do no harm."

"He took it."

Now the woman looked at her carefully, turning from her cleaning to sit down in a broad chair. She drew Marie to her. "Tell me, child--what do you know?"

"Ishky took it, wid Ollie an' Kipleg. Dey smashed it all tuh pieces."

"No, no--tell me in our tongue."

"Ishky an' Ollie--"

Shomake's mother shook her head, her eyes full of pain; she let go of Marie, and Marie turned and fled from the shop. She ran through the hall and up the steps as if a thousand devils were after her. When her mother opened the door, Marie buried her face in her skirt.

"Child--child--"

She lifted Marie in her arms, took her inside, afraid at the way the girl's body trembled.

"Now, tell me."

"Ishky took it, Ishky took it!" she screamed.

## TWENTY-FOUR

THEY TOOK THOMAS EDISON BECAUSE THEY NEEDED ALL they could get. He promised to fight.

He moved up the block with them, as proud as he had ever been in all his life, swinging his stocking from side to side, and swaggering almost as much as Ollie.

Across the avenue and down toward the river, he imagined the eyes of all the world to be upon him. It was good, and it was satisfying; but it wearied his mind. And he was not quite certain whether he wouldn't be afraid. Once, he wanted to go back, but Ollie threatened to break his neck, and then he went on with them.

Then he began to sing. He sang at the top of his voice, swinging the stocking, kicking up his feet in front of him.

"Shuddup," Ollie said.

"Geesus yeah."

Some of the boys began to laugh, and that angered Ollie. Everyone knew that Thomas Edison was his brother.

"Shuddup!"

"Awright, Ollie."

His head was heavy, and it began to loll from side to side. Instead of kicking up his feet, he began to stumble. He was tired, but no one would let him rest. He knew that he had to go on, to prove to them now that he was not too different from the rest.

SHOMAKE AND I played, and time passed. We leaned over the embankment, where the sewer flows into the river, and threw stones at things. Sometimes, a bottle would shoot out, and then we would throw until we had broken it.

Shomake laughed so much that I was certain he had forgotten about the fiddle. Anyway, I would not remind him. We set out to find the garden.

I say, "We'll look over duh whole world."

"A magic gaden, ain' it?" Shomake wants to know.

"Yeah."

Shomake thinks a while, and then a wonderful idea occurs to him. "If it's a magic gaden, den it c'n be anywhere at ah,"

"Well--"

"Sure, if it's magic."

"Awright."

We go into a broad field, full of high grass, and we pretend to look between the grass. That sets us laughing, because how could the garden be in such a place? Then we look beneath a tree.

We come to a fountain, bubbling with clear water, and we both drink. Shomake splashes the water all over his face, and then we throw water at each other. We squirt it from our mouths, and after that we roll in the grass to dry ourselves.

We are muddy and dirty and wet, but what difference does that make? Suddenly, I spring up and tell Shomake to run. I chase him, and then he chases me, and finally, when we end up beneath the tall rocks, we are both sobbing with pleasure and panting for breath.

"Less rest," I say.

So we sit down, tell each other about the garden, describe it as though we had lived in it all our lives. Isn't it strange that we both know so much about this magic garden, when neither of us has been there? Shomake knows that there will be music in the garden, and fiddles, too; but that does not please me so much, as I cannot play a fiddle.

"Phonographs," I say.

"Yeah."

"An' cake."

"Yeah."

Marie, too, I think; but I don't tell that to Shomake. Only, I dream a little by myself of how Marie will be in the garden with us.

Now we are rested, and we begin to climb the rocks. Oh, we climb very carefully, because if you slip here, you will be smashed to bits. And halfway up, we rest on a ledge and look at the river.

How beautiful the river is, winding away into the mist like a streak of silver! The world is at our feet, and we are young and happy. Far off, all clouded with mist, lies the city, a thousand tiny houses. The gas tanks break up like gray monsters; the elevated trains crawl like snakes. And over the river, there are bridges and bridges, as far as we can see.

Isn't this a place to forget all things except dreams? Shomake laughs, and I know why he is laughing; he is happy inside of himself. But he is no happier than I am.

We are like two fat bugs in the sun, stretching, drinking in air and warm sunshine. Ollie is forgotten, Kipleg, too. Fights are forgotten. Who will bother us here?

"Less climb," Shomake says.

So we go up the rocks, hand over hand, thrilling to the great distance under us. And when we reach the top, we sit down to rest. Here, on the top, a cool breeze blows from beyond the river. And the river crawls at our feet, like a thin silver snake. Then, turning around, Shomake sees Ollie and his gang.

"Hey, Shomake!"

Ollie led the way, Kipleg beside him, and behind them the rest of the gang trailed out. The long, weighted stockings swung from side to side, and Ollie's yellow hair blew in the breeze and glinted in the sunshine.

"Hey, Ishky!"

Slowly, Ishky and Shomake rose to their feet. Without thinking a great deal, they knew the purpose of the gang. They went forward hesitantly, Ishky leading the way.

"Hey, Ollie, whereya goin'?" he called.

Ollie grinned.

Kipleg said, "We're gonna git Blackbelly."

"Where is he?"

"He'll come down, awright."

"C'mon," Ollie commanded.

Shomake hesitated. The spell of the river seen from the top of the bluff was still upon him, the peace and the lull of the breeze. And as bitterly as he hated anything, he hated fighting. He held back.

"We gotta go eat," Ishky explained.

"Yeah," Shomake said. "I said tuh my mudder I'd be back tuh eat."

"Yeah."

Ollie stood in front of them, legs spread, hands on his hips. His insolent, ready grin still lingered upon his lips. "Geesus," he said. And that was all.

Kipleg said, "All wops an' sheeneys are yella."

"Hell, yeah."

"Yella as shid."

"Yuh stinkin' wop."

"I don' wanna fight," Shomake protested.

"I tol' yuh he was yella."

"Areya comin'?" Ollie wanted to know.

"Yeah."

"Well--" Ishky began.

"Are yuh comin', or ain'ya'?" Ollie swung his stocking in a great circle, bringing it close to Shomake's face.

"I ain' done nuttin' tuh you, Ollie."

"Are ya comin'?"

"Geesus, givem dere lumps!"

"Kick duh shid oudda duh yella basteds!"

"Awright," Ishky nodded.

They fell in at the back, with Thomas Edison, who walked with his head hanging down, he was so tired now.

## TWENTY-FIVE

DOWN NEAR THE RIVER, NEAR AN OVERHANGING ROCK, they held their council of war, and now Ollie nodded significantly at a rope he wore round around his middle. They all sat in a circle, Ishky and Shomake too, and very often they glanced up at the bluff, where Blackbelly might be expected to appear. They had left their invitation by moving boldly down to the river. If Blackbelly failed to take it up--

Ollie said, "Jus' lemme get my hands on dat nigger, dat's all."

"Whaddya gonna do, Ollie?"

"Plenny."

Thomas Edison was good and tired, not a little afraid, too, and he began to whimper. He pressed beseechingly against Ishky, and when Ishky shook him off, he looked at Ollie.

Ollie was explaining the science of battle. "Gittem before dey know what's at. Den kick duh nuts offana dem."

"Yeah," Kipleg agreed.

"Don' git yella." Thomas Edison said, "Ollie--"

"Geesus, whaddya wan' now?"

"Ollie--I wanna go home."

"Geesus, d'ya wan' me tuh kick duh shid oudda yuh?"

"Naw. I wanna go home."

"Whatcha leddim come along fer?"

"Nevermin'. You stay here, duh yuh hear me?"

"Ollie--"

"Yuh heard me."

"Awright."

"Whaddya got in yer stockin', Ollie?" someone asked.

"Ashes. But I'm gonna use my hands."

"Whaddya got duh rope fer?"

"You'll see."

They went to the fountain, then, and they all had a drink. Then they climbed until they were halfway up the bluff, in a small level space. They waited there.

Thomas Edison sat and blubbered, shifting his heavy head from side to side. Deep dread grew upon him, and more than anything else, he longed to be at home with Oloman. He would go to her when it was over, and he would tell her how Ollie had treated him.

"Yeah," he muttered, "yeah, duh dirty shid."

And Shomake stood to one side, staring at the ground; already he was trembling, not so much with

fear as with hate, hate for Ollie and all the rest. Kiple lit a cigarette, passing it around.

## TWENTY-SIX

WHEN THE CIGARERETTE CAME TO ME, I PUFFED ON IT. Maybe you won't understand that, but there is a lot about Ishky that I don't understand myself. I don't want to fight, so why don't I jump up and run away? I don't know. Maybe because the gang was my idea in the first place.

But now I'm afraid. What is Ollie going to do with that rope he has wound around his middle? If I run, I will lose face, and anyway, they can run after me and catch me. Then they would beat me.

I know I hate Blackbelly. Now is my chance to get back at him, to beat him the way he beat me. Only--

I have to tell you things the way they happened. I have to tell you about this fight, and what came after. You see that Shomake and I are in it already. But we didn't want to fight. Is it any wonder that, when I look up and see Blackbelly and his gang, I am frightened?

They come down slowly, bunching together, and we all gather together, too, even Thomas Edison. Ollie steps to the front, because he has more guts than anyone else. I wonder how soon the fight will start.

The sun is still shining, and that is the strangest thing of all. It comes down through the trees, mottling the ground; I see how it splatters Shomake with light and shadow. And below us, off to one side, is the river, lovely and silver as ever. Why do they want to fight? That is what I ask myself now.

Shomake edges close to me, pressing up against me, and I can feel his body trembling. But I am trembling, too. Then, after all, I am nothing but a coward--no more than that. You are yellow, Ishky. What will I do when the fight starts? Should I run away. But if I do, Ollie will only get me later.

Where are all my dreams now? Where is the happiness that existed between Shomake and me when we spoke about the secret garden?

He saw Ollie's gang, and he realized that they outnumbered him two to one, or almost. He could turn around and go back, or he could go on. Ahead, there was defeat or glory, and because Ollie had made the odds so big his small wide body swelled with rage.

"Hey, yuh Blackbelly nigger!" Ollie yelled.

Fishface said to him, "Geesus, lookit what dey got. Less git oudda here."

"You yella basted."

"Geesus, Blackbelly, dey'll kick shid oudda us."

"Will dey?"

Blackbelly advanced slowly, swelling all the while with rage and hate. He swung his stocking around his head. Let them bring on ten or a dozen or a hundred. Let them.

He climbed down, until he stood face to face with Ollie, and behind him the rest of the dark boys came. They stood in a small cluster, waiting for Blackbelly, waiting for Ollie.

Perhaps if Blackbelly noticed one thing more than anything else then, it was Ollie's splendid beauty. Just a little higher than Blackbelly he stood, but slimmer, his insolent sin playing about his lips. His blue eyes blinked and sparkled, and his yellow hair tossed upon his head. He was laughing at Blackbelly. Blackbelly saw Ollie's beauty. Perhaps he saw other things, too, for he saw the line of rope wound around Ollie's middle.

His heart beat with anger, with hate. He wanted to claw the smile off Ollie's face. He longed to be alone with Ollie. There would be other times when he would be alone with Ollie.

The boys behind edged up to Blackbelly. He was secure, stout and solid.

"Lookit duh nigger basteds," Kipleg laughed.

"Shuddup!" Blackbelly snapped.

"Whaddya gonna do?" Ollie wanted to know, swinging his stocking.

"Do what we wanna."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"S'pose we ain' gonna leddyda?"

"Try an' stop me, white boy."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Blackbelly waved a hand at his gang. "C'mon," he said.

"Whereya goin'?" Ollie demanded.

"Down dere."

"Oh no."

"Doncha try tuh stop us, white boy!"

"G'wan den."

"C'mon--"

Blackbelly took a step, and Ollie sprang at him, catching the swinging stocking upon one shoulder. In a moment, the two gangs were together, punching, swinging stockings, clawing at, tearing at each other. Only Thomas Edison hung back. Ishky and Shomake were launched into it. A colored boy sprang at them, and they fought back, instinctively.

NOW, FOR just a moment, I have forgotten that I am afraid. I remember only that I hate all niggers. This isn't Blackbelly, but what difference does that make?

A stocking hits me on the face, scratches me, but I hardly notice it. Now I don't seem to know anything, except that I am fighting. Shomake is crying swinging awkwardly with his fists. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ollie and Blackbelly, rolling over and over.

How long will we fight? Already, it seems that we have been fighting forever. Perhaps we will fight forever.

## **TWENTY-SEVEN**

SHALL I FIGHT FOREVER? IS THIS THE SAME ISHKY, WHO is now battling like a wild beast? I have fought before, but there was never such a fight as this. This is kill or be killed, and I am no longer a human being, but a beast.

They don't give up. Time passes, and it seems that hours have gone by, though it cannot possibly be as long as that. Yet they don't give up.

We can't stop fighting. Brown flesh is under me, and then brown flesh is on top of me. We roll on the ground, holding tight to each other, and then we beat at each other's face.

I catch one glimpse of Shomake. Now he is fighting with someone else--Shomake who never fought with anyone before. You must understand that--to understand this madness of ours. We are not fighters, most of us. I am not a fighter, Shomake is not a fighter, yet now we are fighting like

wild beasts. You must understand that, and you must understand how completely mad we have gone.

Shomake screams, sobs, and tears at a boy. He is thrown to the ground, where he lies sobbing for a moment, but then he is back on his feet, and fighting again. His small, thin form is filled with fury. What has come over him?

Has the entire world gone mad? But no, that is hardly possible. The sun still shines. In fits and starts I am aware of it, placid blobs of light creeping through the trees. But the sun is nothing to me now. I have suddenly become a creature of battle, and my only purpose in life is to fight, to fight and to fight and to fight.

"Dirty nigger!" I hear Shomake scream. It is the same Shomake.

The curses pour from his lips in a rapid stream as he fights on. Now two of them have the enemy beneath them, and they are beating him unmercifully. How can the gentle Shomake beat a living being like that?

But I have business of my own, and my hands are full. This boy is smaller than I, and he has lost his stocking, so now things are more evenly matched. Tearing at each other, we roll over and over on the ground. We spit and claw and bite. I am crying, and he is crying, too; and while we fight, we hammer words at each other.

"Jew basted!"

"Lousy dinge!"

"Stinkin' sheeney, I'll cutcha up!"

"I'll tear yer nuts off!"

Basted - louse - shid - bitch - sheeney - nigger shid - sonuvabitch -shidface -

The world is tossing, spinning. But the world has always gone round. Now I am seeing it. How strange to see the world go round!

"Niggerdinge!"

A face to beat at, a black face under me. There is no strength left in my arms, but nevertheless I continue to hammer away. Why doesn't the face disappear into the earth?

Then I am underneath. The world turns, and fists beat into my face. My fists? Hardly. I am crying a little insane, I imagine. I spit, growl, catch a finger between my teeth.

I bite with all my strength. Warm, sweet blood wells out, and then the finger is torn away. Is it the same finger thrust into my eye? Screaming with pain, I twist my body, punch and claw at the thing above me.

There is no end and no surcease. Ishky has become a creature of battle. As long as the world is, he will fight.

We roll and roll. Dreadful fear comes into my heart; perhaps we are rolling to the edge of the bluff. If that is so, we will roll off, plunge down on the rocks. I surge away from the other, gain my feet.

And then, for an instant, I have a spreading glimpse of the battle. No, it isn't over; they are still fighting, and I know that they will fight on and on. Shomake is crying. Above all the other noise, I can hear him crying.

Why don't they give up? Why don't the niggers run away? Why don't we run away? Why don't I run away? I am only Ishky, and no fighter, nor is Shomake any more of a fighter than I am. Yet we keep on fighting. How is that?

"Goddammnigger!"

"Whitebitch"

"Shiddinge!"

Face to face, we stand, throwing blows at each other. But there is no more force in the blows, no strength left in either of us. We know that, and we both cry bitterly. Is it possible that here, in the middle of all this fighting, I feel kinship with him? I don't know. I only know that I must go on fighting.

We fall again, roll over in each other's arms, doing no more damage, only hugging tightly. That is what the fighting has come to. Then, suddenly, I hear Ollie scream in triumph. The enemy tears himself from me, and I start to my feet weakly. But I don't run after him.

Can it be that the fight is over? I am dizzy, weak; I can't stop my tears or the shaking of my body. I sit down on the ground, holding my head in my hands. Let them come at me now. It makes no difference anymore. I am through with fighting; there is nothing at all left in me.

But the fight is over. It must be over. I see Shomake, who is standing by himself, crying, and trying to wipe the tears from his face. How small he looks now, and how beaten!

Most of the niggers are gone now. But Ollie is still fighting with Blackbelly. Then how long has it been? If nearly as long as it seemed to me, how is it that Ollie can remain upon his feet and fight?

All that are left are making a circle about Ollie and Blackbelly. Some were chasing the enemy, but now they are coming back. They are all gathering about Ollie and Blackbelly. I go nearer. Shomake is close to me, trying hard to smile. But how can he smile, when he is crying so hard?

## **TWENTY-EIGHT**

THEY HAD GONE, ONE BY ONE, AND NOW ONLY Blackbelly was left. He saw the end. Well, he had expected no more than this.

At first, he and Ollie had been together upon the ground, tearing at each other; now they were on their feet, face to face, exchanging blow for blow. And around them, in a crouching, battered, silent circle, stood the gang, waiting. In his fighting, Blackbelly could see that gang; and if red mists of heat and anger brought things to his mind human beings have long forgotten--then he saw the pack, crouched and ready, while the leaders of the pack fought.

Had it been that way once, when men were young? Did he remember, or did he know nothing beyond his fighting? Ollie would not be beaten. Handsome, insolent, blond, and still laughing through his tears of hate, he fought as he had fought in the beginning, lightly, eagerly. And, in that, Blackbelly realized his defeat. Doggedly he battled on, tired, moving little now, his short heavy legs anchored to the ground. He put his wide head down and fought, while tears streamed down his face.

And the pack waited for the kill.

Ollie saw victory. At any rate, the gang was behind him, waiting for his word. And Blackbelly, alone, wept tears of rage and disappointment.

They circled warily. The fight was telling, and their arms were heavy as lead. Ollie's freckled skin was cut and scratched, and in one place, from his cheek, blood was flowing freely. There was no strength left in his arms.

Then Blackbelly went down. Taking a step backward, he tripped over a rock, and in a moment, the gang was upon him. As they piled on top of him, Ollie stepped back and out of it, shaking his head dazedly.

Blackbelly struggled for a moment under the mass of squirming bodies, and then he lay still. And Ollie stood there, staring.

"Holdim!" Kipleg shouted. "Hol' duh black basted!"

"Gottim."

"Hey, Ollie, whaddya wan' us tuh do?"

"Geesus--"

But he knew it was over, and the fight gone from him at last, he lay still under the pile of bodies. Breathing, his body heaved and moaned, and from between his clenched lips came little moans of pain. But he no longer cried. Now he didn't care. The battle had come, and now the battle was gone, and slowly there filtered into his mind the meaning of defeat.

Hate grew in him like a slow fire, hate so furious that if it had been translated into strength, he could have thrown the pile of bodies from him.

## TWENTY-NINE

IN THE BEGINNING, WHEN THE FIGHT STARTED, THOMAS Edison was the only one who held back. He crouched alone by a rock, pressing against it, trembling, and from there he saw Ollie and Blackbelly crash. His eyes grew wider as the two gangs spilled into the fight. He pressed his hands to his large face, his mouth hanging open with fear.

But he stayed then; for the sight was fascinating and wonderful and terrible. It was only when the battle surged over toward him that he ran away. Nobody noticed him, nobody remembered him; but he thought that both gangs would be after him. He didn't look back, he was so certain that a mob of screaming boys with murder in their hearts would be speeding after him.

He climbed up and over the rock, and then he stumbled through a clump of heavy thickets. Branches beat at his face, and he fought them aside as if they were living things. He began to climb, until his heart pounded like a triphammer; and then, losing his footing, he rolled back, over and over, like a limp bundle of clothes.

Scratched and bleeding, he brought up against a tree near the bottom of the bluff. There, for just a moment, he lay still; then he stirred, moved his oversize head. He began to whimper like a hurt animal, and he slapped his hands against his face. Holding his eyes tightly shut, he moved his head, as if peering here and there. Then he opened his eyes, stared behind him in terror.

But nobody came--

Groaning, he stood up, and he climbed again. Step by step, he pulled himself along, until he had reached the top of the bluff, where he lay upon his stomach, inert and sobbing.

Then he turned to look. From where he was, the gangs were hidden, but before and beneath him spread the peaceful misty city, the crawling river and the bridges. He stared and stared, and then he smiled. He began to walk, but in a little while he was crying again. His head hurt.

It was a long way back to the block, and he shambled slowly. Often, he looked behind him, and once he said, softly:

"Ollie--I ain' yella."

On the streets, he ran, and when he reached the block it appealed to open its arms to him. How quiet and peaceful and familiar it was, with its two walls of flat houses, with its sun-baked pavement! His head hurt terribly. One hand, which he looked at continually, was cut and bleeding, but he didn't mind that so much as his head. It seemed to him that his head was swelling and swelling; and soon it would burst. Then what would become of him? The thought brought tears, and they cut more grooves in the dirt that covered his face.

Almost at his house, he imagined Ollie was calling him, like this, "Hey, yuh goddam Thomas Edison loony!" Stopping, he stared behind him; but there was nobody on the street, nobody at all. Then where was Ollie?

"Awright, Ollie," he whispered pleadingly.

He came to his house as an animal comes to its lair, opened the door, and crawled slowly into the dim hall. The darkness was good and restful, like a mother. Then he knew that he wanted Oloman.

"Oloman?" he said.

He opened the door, went into the kitchen, where she sat, rocking and knitting-soft rhythm, rocking and knitting. He swayed his head from side to side.

"Oloman" he said.

She turned to look at him, and then she limped to his side, shaking her old, withered head. "Poor fool--what have they done to you now?"

"My head hurts."

"Aye, and you're cut and bruised, poor fool." She took a wet rag, water, and she began to wash and soothe him, whispering to him all the while.

Ah--there was no one like Oloman, no one at all. He purred and wilted under her hands, stretching himself. But inside his head, it made no difference, and he was still growing and growing.

"Duh head, Oloman."

"Yes, poor fool--only close your eyes, and try not to think. Thinking is not in its way for such as you. Do not think, and rest that large poor head of yours."

"Yeah--yeah--"

"And tell the old woman what happened."

"Ollie, Oloman."

"Aye, the beast! Don't I know him for the beast he is, out of my own blood? Tell me what Ollie did to you, my poor scatterbrain fool."

"He made me fight."

"Eh? How's that? If he was beating you!--"

"I runaway."

"Yes," she nodded. "Yes, poor fool, we must know how to run from them that are stronger. That is the only way there is out of it."

"I fell, den."

"Poor fool, poor fool," she sighed.

She sat down, and he pressed up against her, trying to forget his pain in her comfort, in the warm assurance her presence gave him. She rocked and knitted, while he mumbled to himself, pressing his hands against his head. Then he stumbled to his feet. His head was still swelling and swelling; he knew that it would never stop: in that way, it would go on swelling until it burst. But not in here. He knew that it must not burst in here, where everything was so close and comfortable. It would frighten Oloman.

He walked toward the door, slowly.

"Where to now, poor addlebrain?"

He went out of the door, shaking his head, and outside he stood with his face turned up, soaking the sunshine into himself. He smiled a little. Out here-- Let it burst, because it would harm nobody but himself. And he was not afraid of the harm it would do him, not afraid anymore.

With dragging steps, he walked up the block, until he came to the house where Ishky lived. He

tuned into the hall, and then he began to go up the steps. No more danger from Ollie now; here, Ollie would never think to look for him. But he didn't care about Ollie. Ollie could hurt him no more than his head hurt now.

The steps were long. After a while, it appeared to his dulled mind that he had been climbing forever. This he associated with the climb up the bluff. Once, he had fallen down, and now he would have to be careful not to fall again, very careful; because his head had swelled to such a size that if he fell once more, it would surely burst. Strangely, he smiled just a little bit at the thought of his head bursting. If he pricked it with a pin-- He began to laugh, and in his imagination, he saw his head like a monster balloon. Soon, it would float him away. There was nothing quite so funny as the picture of himself hanging under his head, floating.

He came to the top of the stairs, and he stepped out onto the sun-baked roof. Always full of sun, and steaming with hot tar, making the most delightful smell in the world. Tired, he sat down to rest, sprawling his legs out in front of him. He made a tar ball, chewed upon it.

He spat now and again, as his mouth filled with the dark juice. Once, he touched the cut on his hand, winced with the pain, smiled then.

Nothing in all the world was quite so peaceful as this roof with the sun baking it. Birds around him, and overhead the blue sky, but no other life. If his head burst here, it would scatter into the blue sky. He wondered whether he would drop then.

He made a tar ball, threw it; then he made another and threw that. He laughed with quiet joy and satisfaction, because he was happy and alone, because he was in a place Ollie would never think of.

"Ollie," he said, just to test his theory out; and then he cocked his head carefully to one side, waiting for an answer.

"Ollie."

"Geesus, Ollie, whaddya gonna do?"

His mouth dropped, and his gaze wandered all over the roof, but he knew that Ollie was nowhere near him.

Then he rose, walking over to the airshaft. Vividly, he remembered how Ishky had attempted to leap across it the day before.

Then he had been afraid, and rightly. But now his head was swollen out and out, like a great balloon. He was hanging from his head, in the same way that a basket hangs from a balloon. And if he stepped out over the airshaft, he would float. Perhaps he would float away--all the way to the sky.

At the thought, he laughed with delight. And, awkwardly, he scrambled over the edge of the roof.

He fell close to the house, where there were no clotheslines to impede his flight. He fell upon the rubbish with a sickening crash, and he lay still.

## **THIRTY**

HOW IS IT THAT I HATE BLACKBELLY NO MORE? IT CAME about like this.

We are all in a circle, watching, and he and Ollie are face to face, showering blows upon one another. I am still crying from my own fight, but under my breath I manage to urge Ollie on.

("Killim! Duh dirty black basted! Shiddon his face, Ollie! Make'im eatis nuts!")

Blackbelly goes down, and I leap in with the others. Everyone is trying to hit him at the same time, Shomake, all of them; all our hate is concentrated on Blackbelly. The battle between the gangs is over, but Blackbelly is still left. We want to tear him to pieces. Suddenly, Ollie yells, "Aw, lay

offana him!" One by one, we separate ourselves, until only Kipleg and two more boys are holding Blackbelly. He's bleeding from the nose, and his shirt is torn all to shreds, but he is no longer crying. Sullenly he stands there, staring at us, his yellow eyes roving from one to an other, fixing themselves finally upon Ollie, who is laughing at him.

"Well, shidface," Ollie says.

And then--I no longer hate Blackbelly. It is difficult to explain, but all in a moment, my hate has vanished. Inside, I am limp and weak, but I see something.

(I saw that thing for many years. What did Ishky know of hate, of power and glory and beauty? But as the years went, I saw it, again and again. But I don't know whether I ever saw it so clearly as then.)

More than I see it, I feel it. I want to go over to Blackbelly, very close to him, take his hand and explain. You see, I am close to him, the same way I was close to Shomake before the fight.

I clench my teeth. Otherwise, I will cry, and I don't want to cry now. I look at Shomake and he looks at me, and perhaps we see the same thing in each other's face. Shomake edges over to me, and his hand reaches out for my arm.

"Ishky--"

"Yeah?"

"Whatta dey gonna do?"

"I dunno."

"Geesus, whatta fight!"

"Yeah."

"I wanna go home."

"Yeah."

Blackbelly attempts to wrench himself free, but they only laugh at him. Then he stands there, in silent rage. Then he appears to swell, inside of himself, and he tries to smile back at Ollie. But he's not good at smiling.

"Whaddya gonna do wittim, Ollie?" Kipleg wants to know.

"Less cokalize him," someone else suggests.

"Doncha worry," Ollie tells them.

Blackbelly mutters, "Lemme go!"

"Oh yeah."

"Yuh gonna git yer lumps."

"Yuh better lemme go," Blackbelly mutters. "I'm jus tellin' yuh dat yuh'd better lemme go."

"I'll piss in yer face, yuh dirty nigger."

"C'mon," Ollie commands. Jus' bringim along, an I'll showya whatta do."

They drag Blackbelly with them, and we all follow Ollie. Shomake says to me: "Geesus, I'm scared."

"It's awright."

"I wanna go home, Ishky."

"Yuh wan' Ollie tuh giveya duh lumps?"

"Naw--"

"Den come on."

Ollie leads us deeper and deeper into the woods, and most of the way, we have to drag Blackbelly. I hope they will let him go, even if he beats me up the first time he sees me on the block. Then we come to a little glen, so thick with trees and underbrush that only a mottled pattern of the sun pierces through. Inside, the ground is moist and wet, and everything about it is deliciously quiet. It is all so pretty that I can't help but find some happiness in it. I hurt all over; I'm bruised and cut, but I can still see beauty.

At one side, there's a tall rock, a tree growing out of it; at the other side, the bluff bends down to the river; and through the trees, I can just glimpse the river, all silver and fine.

We stop there, and they hold Blackbelly under the rock. And then, for the first time, comprehension dawns upon us. Instinctively, we all know what Ollie is going to do, but no one of us says anything. We are taut, eager, and we wait, gathering close about Blackbelly. I think that we are afraid he will escape at the last moment. We have forgotten everything but the game, the drama, and we watch Ollie like a pack of dogs would watch their master.

Ollie walks back and forth, looking at Blackbelly, the grin flickering all over his lips. He blinks his eyes, and then he puts his hands in his pockets. He walks up to Blackbelly.

"D'ya know what dey do tuh dinges in duh sout?" he demands.

"Boy, yuh'd better lemme go," Blackbelly says. But I can see that he isn't sure of himself anymore.

"Gimme a butt," Ollie says to Kipleg. He lights the cigarette, taking several careless puffs. Then, holding the cigarette between his lips, he unwinds the rope from his middle. At one end, he makes a slipknot.

We know what Ollie is up to, and we tremble with fear, with anticipation. Will he dare? Or is it all bluff upon his part? Will he back out at the last moment? Is he only attempting to scare Blackbelly, or is he in earnest? It is an even bet, and, inwardly, we each take our side. I think that Ollie is only bluffing, that he will back out at the last minute.

"Gonna lynchim?" Kipleg asks eagerly.

"Maybe--"

"Gonna really lynchim?"

"Maybe--"

"Nuts!"

"Betcha yuh don', Ollie."

Cutting a piece from the end of the rope, Ollie ties Blackbelly's hands. And slowly, the rage on Blackbelly's face changes to fear. He squirms, struggles, and yells frantically. Then the brief spasm is over, and he stands again in silence, glowering at us. I can see that he is going to call Ollie's bluff, that he doesn't believe Ollie has the nerve to go through with it. I can see that he is making up his mind about what he is going to do to Ollie at some future time. And I can see that now Ollie is beginning to hesitate. All along, it was a game, and he never thought of hanging as hanging. But if he stops now, he will lose face. Ollie is a king and he can't afford to lose face.

Maybe you will ask why I didn't try to stop it. The answer is simple enough. I was afraid.

God, how afraid I am! Suppose it is Ishky, there in Blackbelly's place. What would I do? Shomake presses close to me. He looks into my eyes, and I only shake my head. I don't know.

Some of the others are like that. They are afraid that Ollie will go through with it. Only they are afraid to lose face. Everybody is afraid to lose face. And they are eager, too. Nobody has ever seen

anything like this.

Blackbelly stares at Ollie. "Whaddya gonna do?" he whispers.

"Lynchya."

"Boy, yuh'd better watch out, white boy!"

"Gonna do sumpen?"

"I'll killya dead. Jus' lemme go, an' yuh'll see what I'll do."

"S'pose I don' leddya go?"

"I'll git yuh!"

"Yeah--after we lynchya."

"You ain' gonna lynch me."

"No?"

"Boy, I'm tellin' yuh, lemme go!"

Ollie stares at him, still grinning. But his lips are trembling, and I know that Ollie is afraid. He turns his back, and begins to climb up the rock. We are all staring after him, even Blackbelly.

Shomake begins to cry. He drops back a few steps, holding in his sobs, but I can see how the tears are running down his cheeks. But I don't cry. I stare at Ollie, horribly, horribly fascinated.

The end of the rope is fastened around the base of the tree, and Ollie ties knot after knot. Then he pulls on it, to make sure it won't slip. I can tell that he got this out of a movie or something maybe a book, because he seems to know exactly what to do. After he has fastened one end to the tree, he takes the end with the loop, puts his arm through it, and shinnies up the tree. He crawls out on a branch, letting the loop dangle through a crotch. It just about reaches to the top of the rock. Then he drops from the tree to the ground.

We stand and stare, there is something so awfully dreadful about that loop. Blackbelly stares, too. Now he's afraid. His mouth trembles, and the tears crawl down his cheeks.

"Lemme go," he says hoarsely.

Ollie is back in front of him, not grinning anymore, and almost as frightened as Blackbelly. But I know he won't back out now. He can't.

"Gonna stringim up?" Kiplegh whispers.

"Yeah."

"Maybe--maybe--"

"We'll jus' chokim a liddle," Ollie says.

"Dat's good fer niggers."

"Yeah."

Blackbelly screams, "Lemme go!" He makes a frantic effort to tear himself loose.

We climb the rock, dragging him up with us. Then we put the noose around his neck, drawing it tight. Struggling there, Blackbelly is balanced on the edge of the rock. Then we push him off, scrambling down to the ground. No sound now. We stare at him. We have forgotten everything but the figure hanging from the rope. No sound at all from us.

His body twists and struggles, his feet beating against the rock. He sways like a great pendulum, and his face swells and swells. His eyes appear to pop from his head.

God, it is terrible! There has never been anything so terrible as this.

But we do nothing, only stand and stare. Then Shomake whimpers like a baby.

And Blackbelly continues to kick, his lips working frantically. Now his kicks are lessening.

A moment more, we stare; then we bolt and run.

Some of us are screaming. We run in every direction. I have forgotten everything, except that I must get away from this place.

I have forgotten Shomake. I scramble down the bluff, whimpering.

## THIRTY-ONE

COMING BACK INTO THE STREFT, MARIE SAW THOMAS Edison go into Ishky's house. Now, it is difficult to say why she--followed him--surely not because of any great interest in Thomas Edison. But the halls-- She found it impossible to resist the terrible fascination of the halls, long narrow passageways hardly lit by the flickering gas jets.

She crept into the hall, and again it seemed to her that she was stepping into the corridors of hell. In her haste, she ran up the stairs, but when she got to the roof, it was empty. Where had he gone, then? She heard someone scream from the airshaft. As she approached the airshaft, her fear increased, and then she looked over and saw him.

Her face trembling, she turned away. The woman in the airshaft was still screaming but on the roof there was peace and sunshine. Marie sank to the tar, afraid--afraid to look down the airshaft again or to go back to the street. A sparrow, pecking at the tar, walked toward her, and she watched the sparrow, her mouth wide open.

Life was curious and fearful--but filled with fascination. The sparrow was fascinated with her, and obscurely it came to Marie that she was fascinated with the entire wondrous business of being alive. Thomas Edison lay in the airshaft, and probably he was dead. What fascination in death, in everything, in Thomas Edison! She looked at the sky, threw back her head and found herself smiling through her fear. Smiling. Why was she smiling? The reaction set in abruptly, and she began to cry. Then she made her way back to the street.

A crowd had gathered all of a sudden in front of the house. Excited, anticipative, they all knew that something had happened, without any one of them knowing what. Here was life, fascination, curiosity. Squeezing through the crowd, Marie watched the cellar door. Then they brought out Thomas Edison.

"Geesus--"

"Whaddedo?"

"How duh hell should I know?"

"Lookout dere!"

(Room, room, room, room, give us room and let us pass, room, room--)

What did he want with room now? What now?

From the roof, a flight of pigeons circled, lifted, dropped to the crowd, and circled again. A bluecoat swaggered down the street.

"Dere's a cop--"

"Geesus!"

(Geesus, Geesus--softly, Geesus Christ!)

And every mother thought it was her own son, and the crowd surged back and forth, almost overwhelming the small body. A woman screamed and continued to scream. Nobody knew who she

was.

"Geesus, what duh hell's she screamin fer?"

"Now, awright, make way dere, an' gimme some room. Geesus Christ now, howdya expect me tuh git through? Awright, lady, know it's lousy, an' whaddya wan' me tuh do? Now git away an' lemme through."

The cop pushed his way to the front, standing almost on top of Marie, who saw that it was Thomas Edison and no other, all broken up. Curiosity and fascination. She shuddered and felt sick--the way the blood dripped down.

"Now--who is he?"

A woman fainted, and they carried her out of the crowd.

"Now dere, stop duh shovin'! Whoisee?"

"I knowim."

"Me too."

The procession made its way down the block, carrying Thomas Edison. But they all knew that he was quite dead. Jumped off the roof, or fell off the roof, or pushed off the roof--what difference did it make, when anyone at all could see that he was better off dead? And what was the use of someone like him going on living with a stupid large head that he could scarcely carry on his shoulders?

Marie followed them, squeezing, thrusting, hoping she would miss nothing of it. All shuddering, thrilling, sick and almost ready to vomit, she knew it was wonderful nevertheless.

"Well, where's he live?"

"Dere."

"Dat's duh house, right dere!"

The law thrust in with the body, all the way into the kitchen, where Oloman sat knitting. And they stood with the body, while the old, old woman stared at them. Then they set the body down on the kitchen table. The old woman only stared.

"Awright, git out! Ah of yuh--clear out! C'mon, now no trouble!"

The old woman looked at the body. Thomas Edison there. The law hardly knew what to say, and it twisted its cap round and round.

"What happened?" the old woman whispered.

"Fell offana duh roof, I guess."

"Fell off..."

"Yer son?"

"No, no--my grandson."

"Well, I'm sorry--"

"Yes--yes--and he's dead, I take it. He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yeah."

"Dead--poor fool. Reaching to the sky ..."

"Eh, mam?"

She shook her head, holding out her trembling hands. "No--no, you would not understand that. He reached up--up to the sky. Do you see? Now he's dead, poor fool. Or maybe not so much of a fool--if I could say ..."

"He wasn't right in duh head, lady?"

"Not right--or maybe too right."

"Take it easy, mam."

"Yes." She turned to him, smiling. "Nothing the matter with me. Only--this poor fool." Then she began to cry, easily, softly.

"Easy, mam--"

Outside, the crowd lingered. No reason to go away, when there was high drama within. Marie lingered, too. What would happen? And where was Ollie? Where was Ollie?

She saw Ollie coming down the street, dirty and bloody. He had been fighting--always fighting. She saw how white his face was--white as a sheet. Now what would Ollie do? What would Ollie do now? The crowd made way for him; nobody spoke. First, he hesitated, and the crowd wondered whether he knew. Or didn't he know? Wouldn't he go in? He went in very slowly.

He went in, and in the kitchen, he saw the policeman. He shivered, started to go back, and then he saw Thomas Edison. Oloman said nothing. Slowly, he approached the table, until he stood next to his brother, weak, feeling sick, feeling that any moment his knees would give beneath him.

"You'll torture him no more," the old lady said.

He went out, and again the crowd made way for him. Marie followed him, as he started up the block.

"Ollie--Ollie!"

He began to run. Reaching the avenue, he ran until it seemed that surely his heart must break. Then, sobbing, he sank against a building. In great gasps, he cried, his chest heaving, his heart swelling up inside of him.

On and on and on, his legs working under him like pistons. The lots were ahead of him, beyond that, the river. Then he remembered.

Blackbelly was dead.

He swerved aside, but he could run no more. On one corner, he sank into a little pile against a building. His mouth dropped open, hot saliva running from between his lips. But there was no rest here--none. He had to go back to the house.

It seemed to him that he could not find the way back to the block. How long had he been walking? When he came to the block again, the sun was low, the afternoon already gone. No crowd in front of his house now. Had it been all a dream?

He came back to the house. Now it was empty, except for Oloman, who sat alone. Where was Thomas Edison? Slipping in, he peered at Oloman. Then she turned around and saw him.

"Come here," she said.

He came, slowly, trembling.

"You see the black sin on your soul?"

"Yeah," he whispered.

Her eyes softened then, and she held out one hand. Then he was in her arms, sobbing out the story. Night fell on them, and Oloman stared ahead of her--her face stony and silent.

## **THIRTY-TWO**

KIPLEG WENT BACK, HESITATINGLY, BECAUSE THE Fascination was greater than the fear.

Trembling, he crept down the slope, felt his way through the underbrush, and came to the place where they had lynched Blackbelly.

All gone now, but Blackbelly was still there, hanging, not swaying now. Kipleg knew that he was dead.

Kipleg stared at him, trembled, wiped the sweat from his face, and continued to stare. It was so peaceful. Now Blackbelly was no longer struggling; his head drooped forward. No challenge now. No hate. No defiance. Only Blackbelly hanging there, while the breeze from above the river moved his clothes.

(He's dead. Kipleg, isn't he dead? I don't know. Oh, my God, I don't--)

But no hate is left. Kipleg stared without hating, curiously, wonderingly. What had made the change? Was it so awful, now Blackbelly was dead? But what did they do to men who killed? What would they do to him?

He crept away, but all the time he kept looking back. He couldn't help but look back.

And all the time he climbed back up the bluff he looked down to where Blackbelly hung. Death hung over him, like a still, dreadful mystery--dreadful as Blackbelly was in his death. It was more than fear. "Dirty nigger," he whispered.

But it meant nothing to him now, for death was the great master, and he crawled on up the bluff, leaving the Negro behind him, not hating. He stood up, and the breeze from above the river played over him.

He walked on, always looking behind him, and as he walked, fear reasserted itself. If they came for him, he would hang, like Blackbelly. Death was a grim master.

Ahead, he saw Shomake, all in a heap. Now he wanted company--any company in his misery. He called, "Shomake!"

Shomake turned around, saw him.

"Whaddya cryin' fer?"

"I dunno."

"Geesus, don' be a baby."

"Is he dead?" Shomake whispered.

"I dunno."

"What'll dey do tuh us?"

"Howda I know?"

They sat down together, staring over the river. Shomake wept silently. Then they stood up, as by some unspoken accord.

"Less git oudda here."

"Yeah."

They walked to the block, looking back, always looking back. Shomake was tired, terribly tired. He wanted to be home, to be solidly encased in the darkness of the back room.

Just before they reached the block, they began to run. Kipleg turned off, ran down the avenue, but Shomake dashed for the safety of his store. His father glanced up at him, but Shomake didn't pause. He ran into the back room, plunged onto the bed; gripping the covers, he lay there, and the close twilight of the place closed over him.

Dark and comfortable here, where they could never come for him. Blackbelly was dead, but the

dark mystery wouldn't come in here. Warm smells and good smells, and close comfort. He crawled onto the bed, up to the pillow, and then he forced his face down onto the pillow, wetting it with dirty tears.

When his mother came into the room, she saw him lying there, his clothes torn and covered with long streaks of dirt.

"Child," she said.

Turning over, he looked at her, his eyes filled with such fear as she had never seen before. He had been crying, and the tears had furrowed lines on his face. Now he stared at her as if she were a thing of horror; then he put a hand in front of his face, His lips were trembling.

"Child, what is it?"

"Nothing--nothing."

"What are you afraid of here? Is there anything to be afraid of here? Tell me--"

"Nothing."

"You were fighting--"

"No, no, no--I swear that I wasn't, mother mine. No, I wasn't fighting. No."

"It's all right, child. Perhaps you were only playing. I didn't mean to frighten you. Come--and let me clean your face." But when she put her hands on him, she felt how he was trembling.

"Tell me what's wrong."

He thought rapidly. He mustn't tell--anything but that. Blackbelly he must never speak of, never. Otherwise, he would hang in the same way--and he was afraid.

"Tell me--"

"My fiddle. I want the fiddle."

"Yes--yes, you'll have it, child. Ishky took it, and he'll bring it back ..."

"Ishky! He took my fiddle? Ishky took it?" The world was crumbling all around him.

"Yes, yes, but not for any dreadful reason. I tell you he'll bring it back."

"No he won't."

"Child, stop trembling--look at me!" But how could he stop, how, with fear and hurt and terror surging all over his body? Blackbelly was hanging there, dead. Only, she didn't know. She would never know.

## **THIRTY-THREE**

THE WORLD GOES ON, AROUND, THE RIVER FLOWS AND THE sun shines. If Blackbelly is dead, Ishky is alive, and others are alive, too. They must go on.

My story is almost over--almost, but not quite. Blackbelly died, hanging from the tree; and from him came death, the strange master. Death comes like night comes, and if you understand, neither are terrible.

But I was afraid--God, how filled with fear I was! Blackbelly's legs, kicking and kicking. It made a picture for me, fastening itself over my eyes. I turned around, plunged down the bluff.

Now, what difference does it make if I plunge to my death? Death, the strange master, has taken me. Blackbelly is dying back there--

I go all the way down the bluff, as quickly as I can, and then I run frantically toward the river. My

heart pounds, and all the time I am looking behind me. Somewhere up there, Blackbelly is dead--swinging, Like a branch in the breeze.

The river stops me. What now? I stand upon the edge, swaying, looking down. Sewage and dirt--but water to take me in, and payment there to the strange master.

Do you see? *I killed Blackbelly!*

All over me, inside of me, the words are written. I killed him, right from the beginning, with my heart full of hate. The gang was mine--not Ollie's. I had thought of it; I led Ollie on--

(Turn around, Ishky, and look at the bluff, where Blackbelly swings. Blood is all over you.)

I begin to scream, hard frantic screams that come from far down in my belly, and I throw myself on the wet, brown earth, burying my face in it. Then I roll over, and I see that a man is watching me. What does he think? Does he know? Does he know? But, of course, he knows--

(You killed him.)

"What'll he say--what'll he say?"

I spring to my feet, and run from him. I must run forever, from everyone; and now I keep looking back at the man. No, he isn't following me. But he knows; he knows. They all know. Sooner or later--

I have to walk, I am so tired; I can run no longer. So I walk, and I find that I am saying to myself, "You don't hate him, you don't hate him, you don't hate him." That is so. In death, hate is gone.

All things have gone now, all my dreams. But the sun still shines; the wind still blows....

"Where duh hell duh yuh tink yer goin'?" the cop says.

(Not to me. Traffic is passing. I stand and look at him, and then I begin to run.)

Run, run--run, run--

(All the music of Shomake's fiddle. I destroyed the fiddle. I destroyed Blackbelly. Death, the strange master, and I have become one--one and together.)

Run, run--run, run--

(That will never stop. Time passes, but time means nothing to me anymore. I must keep on, and on--or they will find me. And when they find me, they will hang me by the neck until I am dead. I will have to tell them.)

*"I killed Blackbelly!"*

"Yer lost, sonny?"

*"I killed Blackbelly"*

"Run along now, sonny."

(That's my torture, standing large and terrible in his dark uniform. Will he follow me? I run again, looking behind me. God help me, what will I do when I can run no longer, when my feet break beneath me?)

Run, run--run, run--

(Shomake is playing his fiddle. What did he ever do to me, that I should take his fiddle from him? I am sorry. I am sorry. Shomake, I swear to God that I am sorry.)

The king sits in the jungle, broad and black,  
And under jungle trails I pass, seeking,  
Where are you, Blackbelly, noble king?  
Three of us then, me and the master death,

And Blackbelly. I killed Blackbelly,  
Laughing and laughing and laughing--  
(I stop, panting, crying, laughing. Good God, I have to rest. I can't run forever.)  
No, run, run--run, run--  
Send the drums from the jungle, men are children.  
There. Blackbelly is king of all the jungle land.  
Beat the drums--play the children's game,  
While death, the strange master, comes.

(Where am I? The sun is setting, and all the streets are in shadow, streets I have never seen before.  
How did I get here?)

Run, run, run--Ishky.

(No, I can't run anymore. But I will be caught out here in the dark--with Blackbelly. Go on!)

Only tell me why, Ishky? Why, Ishky? Tell me why? ...

I begin to walk home. What a long way I have come --afraid, always afraid! It's no use, because I  
know what the end will be, when they have me and Ollie and Kipleg--all of us.

I go on walking. The sun is setting, throwing light on the clouds. But there is no promise for me.  
Only terror--

(Try to think of the magic garden, of Marie, of all the beautiful things--)

No, all gone now. ...

Why is my mother so glad to see me? Does she know? Does everybody know?

"Eat," she says, "eat, my heart of all hearts. How worried I was! Where were you this lunchtime?"

"Playin'."

"Yes, yes, and fighting--and eating out your mother's heart. Why are you trembling so?"

"Runnin'."

Then she tells me about Thomas Edison, and I know why. Oh, I know well enough. The strange  
master and I. I can't eat any more. I push the food away.

"You are sick, my child?" she asks in her Yiddish.

"Naw. I don' wanna eat."

I hide in the bedroom, but it all follows me in there. Thomas Edison is dead; Blackbelly is dead.  
And I did it. I have done it all.

I creep out into the hall, and fear follows me. The strange master is with me. He will always be with  
me. Slowly, I go down the stairs to the street, praying all the time. If God is good, he will  
understand.

There is a small, wan figure sitting on my stoop. I sit down next to him. In the deepening darkness,  
we sit there, together. Our hands creep out, find each other.

"Shomake," I say, "I took duh fiddle."

"Yeah-I know."

"It's all smashed."

"Yeah."

"Yuh ain' saw?"

"Naw--"

Night comes, and a strange peace. The block is still. Does the strange master go with night?

"Shomake?"

"Yeah?"

We look at each other. Our world is gone, but we have found something. We both sigh. Shomake moves closer to me. Across the street, Kipleg is coming home. Very slowly, we begin to grin. ...

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