

After Chicago

A Novel By

RICHARD R. KARLEN

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PART ONE

Chicago, 1951-1952

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In our senior year at college, Marty and I talked our parents into allowing us to have our own apartment rather than to continue living in the Burton-Judson dormitories on campus. At first they were reluctant, arguing that we could not be trusted to live in an unsupervised environment, given past troubles with the University. They were referring to a night last year when we had downed one too many beers at the University Tavern and were arrested by the police for hoisting girls onto our shoulders and running down Ellis Avenue at two in the morning while singing the *Whiffenpoof* song at the top of our lungs. This misdemeanor cost our parents the sum of twenty-five dollars as well as the cost of several angry long distance telephone calls. The Assistant Dean of students was not amused with our antics and threatened to expel us from the University if there was another such incident. Personally, I thought he was bluffing, but being kicked out of the University of Chicago was not a threat to dismiss lightly.

We argued with our parents that last year was a long time ago and now, having managed to attain the age of twenty-one, we had nicely mellowed. We pointed out to them that living in our own apartment would not only keep us out of bars but require us to do “mature” things, like cooking our own meals and learning to handle our own finances, such as paying the rent and the electric and gas bills. The clincher was that we had found campus jobs checking coats at Ida Noyes Recreational Hall in the evenings. I might mention that Ida Noyes Recreational Hall was for coeds only. The girls would come in a rush between six and six-thirty, check their books and coats and go off to their meetings. We’d sit around and study until nine or ten when they’d return for their belongings.

Though the pay was only seventy-five cents an hour, we usually worked about four hours a night, which added up to three dollars for each of us every evening. Though we didn't work every night, together we earned about ninety dollars a month, which was twenty dollars a month more than the rent. The added perk, not mentioned to our parents, was that we got to say "hello" to at least thirty girls per night.

Our parents seemed impressed by our jobs, which only goes to demonstrate how easily parents can be seduced into believing how wonderful their kids really are. In addition we offered them the opportunity to demonstrate their unconditional faith and love by continuing to give us enough money to satisfy our Spartan needs.

It wasn't that we didn't start the year with serious intentions. The war in Korea was a bloody carnage and to avoid being drafted, we were required to maintain decent averages. We were now seniors. After the winter break, Marty would be applying to law school and I would be applying to medical school. My marks were not much above average and, though applying to a medical school as a graduate from the University of Chicago carried a modicum of weight, I would, nevertheless, have to produce some decent grades, particularly in subjects like quantitative analysis and comparative anatomy, in order to have any chance of being accepted at a med school, let alone avoid the draft. I would also like to point out that the idea for us to have our own apartment as opposed to living in the dormitories was not that we necessarily wanted to party every night. We really did want to enjoy the sense of being our own persons, of not having to live a rules-and-regulations life of conformity demanded when in the dormitories.

The only apartment we could find that suited our limited budget was a seedy place with a bedroom barely large enough to accommodate a double bed and a bureau. The living room was only slightly bigger than the bedroom. Within walls that badly needed a coat of paint was an old couch that opened up into a ratty double bed, four wooden chairs placed around a small oval table and an alcove with folding doors that con-

tained the kitchen. Within this recess was a small stove, an even smaller refrigerator, a sink, and, on the walls above the stove, several cabinets with broken handles and paint peeling off moldy wood. The rest of the apartment contained a narrow hallway that led from the living room into the bedroom. Off the hallway was a bathroom with barely enough space for an old stained sink, a toilet and a bathtub without a shower.

The address, however, was a big plus. Located just off 61st Street on University Avenue, the apartment was within a few minutes walk to the Midway. After crossing the Midway, that impressive grassy mall, several blocks wide and a mile long that ran from Washington Park to Jackson Park, built at the Columbian Exposition in 1893, we would be at the Quadrangle where our classes were held. Though admittedly not the greatest of living accommodations, we thought we had discovered Shangri La.

As soon as we settled in, we began to make a few practical considerations. The living room couch would be used only in emergencies as a sleeping facility. Nightly, we would sleep together in the double bed, positioning ourselves head to toe in order to avoid embarrassing brushes of male bodies during the night. We would put in a phone, though the cost was \$3.75 a month, more than we could afford, but a required necessity. We decided not to tell our parents about the phone, since we didn't want them bothering us, especially Marty's mother, a possessive, controlling woman.

The academic year began slowly, reasonably. We were attending classes, studying hard, working our shifts at Ida Noyes, enjoying this special moment of independence in our lives. We took particular pleasure in fixing up the apartment. We painted the walls, scrubbed the filth out of the refrigerator, replaced the old handles on the cabinets, and removed the mold off the kitchen wall.

Slowly, we became acquainted with our neighbors, mostly students like ourselves. Across the street was a small grocery store where we'd buy our milk and fresh vegetables. Saturday nights, when we weren't working, we'd meet up with old friends and share a pitcher of beer at the University

Tavern, whose economy depended on management looking the other way when presented with a fake ID by a student, fortunately no longer a problem for us since we were now twenty-one. (Last year, Marty wrote a letter to the *Chicago Sun Times* on the injustice of the twenty-one-year age limit for drinking in Illinois when you considered that an eighteen-year old could be drafted and sent to die in Korea.) Sundays, we would sleep late and clean up the apartment. In the evening we'd treat ourselves to a hamburger at Rusty's on 61st Street and then enjoy a triple feature at the Flexicore, a broken-down movie house on 63rd Street.

We went uninvited to a Friday night dance at one of the fraternity houses where I unexpectedly ran into Lorraine Berger, an old girlfriend. We danced a little and talked about the time when we used to hang out together, which was almost two years ago. Lorraine Berger's looks were okay, the best part of her being her nice full breasts and round juicy ass. In those days we would often meet around nine and grab a hamburger and a Coke at Rusty's. On the way back to her dorm, we'd duck down a few steps leading to the basement of one of the buildings on the quad and play around. We never slept together because: 1. She said she didn't want to, and 2. I didn't know how to go about making her want to. I'd usually wind up dry humping her until I'd come in my pants, which, even for a virgin like myself, was pretty unsatisfactory. She kept promising that one day we'd do it, until she finally broke off with me telling me that she had met this "older" man, an optometrist from Evanston, who would drive down and date her on weekends. I'll bet she was doing it with him, but who needed to know and I never asked.

So here we were, dancing at this stupid frat party, and Lorraine was getting very friendly, throwing her nice woman's thing into my groin. I mentioned to her that I had my own apartment now and would she like to go back with me and have a drink and talk more about old times.

I had a persistent bulge in my pants for the entire six blocks that we walked back to the apartment, which was encouraged by her repeatedly grabbing my butt as we walked. Why, I kept asking myself, was this happening? During the six months when we had been seeing each other, I don't ever recall her touching that part of my anatomy, let alone grabbing it. Something, someone, had warmed her up. The optometrist? Then I remembered that I didn't possess a condom. I used to carry one in my wallet, just in case, but last spring, Bruce Pollack, one of the guys who lived in my dormitory, came running into my room in a desperate state. I gave him my only condom and forgot to replace it, which confirms what I have already admitted about the level of my sexual activity. What to do now? If I suggested that we detour several blocks to an all-night drugstore on 63rd Street before returning to the apartment, she would view me as a complete fool and take off in the opposite direction. My only hope was that Marty, the big make-out man, might have an extra condom sitting in his bureau drawer back at the apartment.

As it turned out, Marty was already at the apartment. He was sitting on the couch with a long-haired, wispy dirty blonde whom he had also met at the dance. I never saw him leave but then I had been distracted by Lorraine's unique way of dancing.

We did the usual introductions, some nodding, a little handshaking. Anna Svensen had this really pleasant face and a smile that seemed to light up the room, especially when measured against Lorraine's smile, which looked almost as much a scowl as a smile.

Lorraine and I were obliged to seat ourselves on the hard wooden chairs around the oval table, not exactly what I had in mind when we walked through the front door. I whispered to her that maybe we ought to slip into the bedroom, but Lorraine nixed the idea.

"What a dump," Lorraine said. This was her way of beginning a meaningful dialectic with strangers. *At the University of Chicago, all discussions were dialectic.*

“We’ve only been living here for two weeks,” Marty said defensively. “Once we put in soft lights and buy a fish tank, you’ll like it better.”

“I think it’s sort of cute,” said Anna.

If I could have managed it, I would have traded in Lorraine for Anna right on the spot and tossed in a month of Ida Noyes’ wages to boot. Not that Anna was any sexier than Lorraine, but big tits and a nice round ass weren’t necessarily what mattered most in life for me. I had to like a woman’s face, her expression, before I could feel attracted to her. While I could work up a hard-on for the Lorraines in this world, it was the Annas that made me want to sing Gershwin love songs. Of course, all this fantasizing was hopelessly delusional. Making wild assumptions without any evidence to support them was one of my personality traits that not only showed a certain weakness of character, but frequently got me into trouble.

“What’s so cute about living here?” asked Lorraine.

“You don’t get the point,” said Anna. “These boys have their own place; they’re free. What a great feeling that must be. I’ve never lived in my own place. Not one freakin’ day.” She checked her wristwatch. (Such a nice delicate smooth wrist.) “In an hour I’ve got to be back at the dorm, or I’ll be locked out.”

I was to learn later that Anna was training to be a nurse at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. The student nurses were sent down to Chicago to do their training in Gynecology and Obstetrics at Billings Hospital, which occupied most of the west campus on 59th Street. I began to ask Anna all the usual, dumb questions you blurt out when you don’t know the person and try to be friendly. “How do you like Chicago?” “Is it windy enough for you?” “What do you think of Lake Michigan? Pretty big, isn’t it?” What you had to like about Anna was that she didn’t think my questions were all that stupid. She responded to them as if I were someone special, that she appreciated the interest I displayed in wanting to know about her even though I hardly knew her.

We didn't have any hard liquor in the apartment since the liquor store on Ellis closed at ten, and after the effects of the loaded punch we had drunk at the frat house had begun to wear off, most of the conviviality among the four of us also wore off. Marty finally left with Anna, which gave Lorraine and me exclusive rights to the couch. But as it sometimes happens in life, if you don't eat the apple when it's ripe, you may be left with a rotten core. I could tell right off the bat that the Lorraine who, an hour ago, couldn't wait to get her hands on me had turned into that piece of spoiled fruit.

"I guess I'm not in the mood," Lorraine said, not making much of an effort to demonstrate the slightest bit of enthusiasm when I tried to slip my hand under her blouse. Though the evidence was circumstantial, I had this instinctive feeling that her change of heart had something to do with my comparing her to Anna Svensen. I confess that I couldn't take my eyes off Anna and it wasn't until she left with Marty that I was able to get down to any serious business with Lorraine, and only then as an afterthought. Since there hadn't been an opportune moment to ask Marty if he had any condoms lying around in the apartment, after a while I decided to call the evening quits.

Lorraine, who said she lived with her parents on the North Side of Chicago, was staying at a friend's apartment on 55th Street. There was a strained silence between us as we strolled across the Midway until Lorraine suddenly blurted out, "What a fucking rude s.o.b. you are. You could have at least pretended that I was in the same room with you."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

I decided that honesty isn't always the best policy and tried my best to convince Lorraine that I really liked her and that I couldn't believe how lucky I was finding her again after all this time. Since University of Chicago coeds were for the most part high IQ broads and Lorraine was no exception, she saw right through my phony amorous advances and told me quite succinctly to "blow it out my rear end."

“I can’t believe I wasted an evening on a jerk like you,” was her final stab to pierce my already shaky ego as we parted ways at her friend’s apartment.

“Hope to see you again,” I said politely, as I turned to leave her.

“Not in my lifetime,” she said.

When I returned to the apartment, Marty was in his underwear, sitting on the couch, smoking a cigarette and drinking a Coke. He seemed unusually preoccupied when I entered, his expression somber, as if he were reflecting on something he couldn’t quite figure out. Once he saw me, however, his mood brightened. He immediately began to talk about Anna Svensen. How different she was from any other girl he’d ever known. He couldn’t exactly explain the difference other than she possessed an intangible quality that simply made him feel good. He was annoying me with all this “intangible” bull, but out of curiosity and a desire to know more about Anna Svensen, I allowed him to continue without interruption.

“When we were dancing, she seemed to melt in my arms. I wanted to hold her so close that neither one of us would be able to breathe. So what did you think of her? Come on, give me an honest impression. I know she’s a little flat, but tits grow once you have a few kids.”

Already they were having children. I thought that was a bit of a premature fantasy for even a great lover like Marty, who specialized in splintering hearts. Marty was the sort of guy who would break promises for the fun of it. Just to annoy him, I asked him what his parents would think about Anna Svensen.

He laughed cynically. “If I brought Anna home, they’d make a suicide pact.”

“So what about the tits that grow after you have a few kids?”

“Don’t be so fucking literal.”

“I’m a scientist. ‘I think, therefore I am.’” (I quote Descartes all the time. It seems to bring into focus many of my conversations with those campus intellectuals who are constantly expostulating on science and God.)

“My parents live in Brookline, Massachusetts, while I am living in Chicago, Illinois. This difference represents a long stone’s throw between parents and child. If you don’t tell them about this *shiksa* from Minnesota, neither will I.”

The word *shiksa* stirred memories of my senior year in high school when our school’s glee club with its all-male voices, combined with a glee club from an all-girl Catholic school. There were three rehearsals together before the concert and during one of the rehearsals I started up a conversation with one of the sopranos, a June Allyson type: jumpy, cute, with dimples that knocked me dead. I called her up and asked her for a date, which took a lot of courage for a gutless sixteen-year-old whose sexual life up until then consisted of reading a few pornographic comic book magazines. What I didn’t know about sex, however, didn’t prevent me from having endless romantic fantasies about beautiful movie stars.

The high school I was attending was a prep school near Trenton. I hitchhiked to this Catholic school, which was about thirty miles away and went to a school dance with Mary Carter. She was wearing a frilly party dress with a big cross hanging around her neck. Nuns were positioned everywhere like sentinels guarding a fort. We danced a little and talked about the songs we were rehearsing. The lemonade punch was too sweet and the crackers and cheese tidbits were tasteless. The dance was over at ten. Summoning up all my courage, I tried to kiss her goodnight, but she was too shy and I wound up brushing my lips against her cheek. The best part of the evening was the hitchhike back to school, the relief escaping from this alien environment and this gentile girl with the big cross hanging around her neck.

So why was Anna Svensen any different from Mary Carter? Maybe she wasn't. Maybe it was I who was different. Since coming to college, I had discovered a libertarian spirit between students, regardless of our philosophical and religious differences. Of course, Anna Svensen wasn't a college student. She was training to be a nurse, and, as I was to discover, nurses were a distinctly different breed. Most of the ones that I came to know had never heard of Plato or Aristotle. Physiology, pharmacology, anatomy were the sort of theoretical subjects that were the basis of their curriculum before moving on to the practical aspects of nursing, which included countless hours in the hospital cleaning up after patients. They were pragmatic, good-natured girls with big hearts.

"What about Amy Rimsky?" I asked Marty.

"What about her?"

"She writes you almost every day. She was the woman of your life, the honey bun of your existence."

"She's not going anywhere."

Amy Rimsky was an eighteen-year-old freshman at Boston College with whom Marty had spent the summer. According to Marty, his girlfriends were always the daughters of millionaires and breathtakingly beautiful. Although Marty had this propensity for exaggeration, I saw a picture of Amy in a form-fitting one-piece bathing suit and I have to admit that she was pretty nice. Marty claimed that he was sleeping with her, that she was obsessed with his sterling member. Maybe she was. I had to admit that she was obsessed with something about him, considering the steady diet of mail he received from her. Was I jealous? Considering my own paucity of success with the opposite sex, I suppose I'd have to confess to a bit of envy, especially since nobody was obsessed with my sterling member.

"So did you kiss her goodnight?" I asked.

“More than once. Tomorrow, after we finish at Ida, I’m going to pick her up at the hospital after she completes her shift. Why don’t you go to a late movie?”

“No,” I said. “I need tomorrow night to study. Monday we start dissecting cats in Comparative Anatomy.”

“Can’t you study while we’re working?”

“It wouldn’t be enough.”

“What about Sunday?”

“Sunday I’m playing touch football in the Independent League.”

“You don’t play football all fucking day.”

“Afterwards the team will be going out for a few beers.” I was being a hard-ass. Since when did I spend a Saturday night studying? Then I said, “I thought she had a curfew at the dorm.”

“She’s got a friend who said she’d sign her in.”

“How’s she going to get back into the dorm later?”

“She’s got that figured out, too. The girl is resourceful.”

Why should I give a goddamn if Marty brings Anna back to the apartment and wants to sleep with her? She’s his girl. He found her. She belongs to him. If our situations were reversed, I would be asking him the same favor. Doing these types of favors for each other was part of the unwritten, silent code we had agreed upon when we decided to move out of the dorms and share an apartment. Anyway, how could I be sure that Anna would agree to sleep with Marty? They hardly knew each other. She had this nice, innocent look on her face, not unlike Mary Carter’s when I tried to kiss her goodnight and wound up planting a brotherly kiss on her cheek. They were cut from the same cloth, Anna and Mary: virgins who didn’t jump into bed without wedding rings on their fingers. Give me a Jewish girl anytime. Jewish girls were intelligent, sensual, uninhibited. Tomorrow, I’ll go and find Lorraine Berger and get on my knees and beg her to forgive me for being such a jerk.

“So whatta ya say?” Marty asked.

“When can I come home?”

“Go see one of those triples at the Flexicor.”

“What about Amy Rinsky?”

He became a little flushed. He had a right to be annoyed with me. Amy Rinsky was none of my business. What was I? Some goddamn priest. I caved. “All right,” I said.

“Thanks.”

I stood there staring at him, realizing that I had absolutely no chance of injecting any sort of conscience into his untroubled, immoral soul.

Then he said to me, “I really like this girl, Frank.”

Who could quarrel with such a sentiment?

I could tell that he wanted to end this conversation about Anna Svensen when he recommended that we listen to a recording of “*Annie Get Your Gun*,” on the 78 long playing record I had borrowed from Kenny Stein. Kenny owned just about every musical show score ever recorded. We pulled out a deck of cards and tried a little honeymoon bridge while we enjoyed the big, rapturous voice of Ethyl Merman belting out “*There’s no business like show business.*” When she and Ray Middleton began to sing “*They say that falling in love is wonderful,*” I found myself losing concentration and started to think of that student nurse from Rochester, Minnesota, who was about to invade my life. I looked up to observe Marty quietly humming along, studying his cards, his face a mask of sublime contentment.

2

I was surprised to find Lorraine working at the University Bookstore as a cashier. It had been almost two months since I had last seen her. I discovered that she had decided to return to school and had already enrolled for the second semester. She had even moved back into the dorms. In the meantime she had found herself a job working at the bookstore, which confused me, since her parents were loaded and she didn't have to work if she didn't want to. What confused me even more was her very friendly greeting when she saw me. She even complained that I hadn't called her. I thought it indiscreet to remind her how bitchy she was the last time we had been together, and that she had made it clear that she wasn't interested in seeing me again. She wrote down a telephone number. "Call me," were her parting words. Go figure it.

We began to see each other a couple of times a week. It turned out that Lorraine was even more of a romantic than I was. She was prepared to fully withhold out for what I wanted most from her, her price being nothing less than *romance*. I sweet-talked her *ad nauseam*, but telling her that I loved her wasn't in my vocabulary. Why she continued to go out with me was a mystery. She treated me almost contemptuously, refusing to hold my hand while we sat at the movies or when we strolled through the Quad: no ass-grabbing or breathtaking kisses. It was going to be a long, arduous route that would eventually lead her into my bedroom, but since I was the odd man out of a living arrangement at our apartment in which I found myself sleeping on the couch more often than not, Lorraine represented my only possible source of relief from an intolerable situation. I was, therefore, determined to stay the course with her.

I complained about Lorraine to Anna, who was now staying at our apartment whenever she wasn't working at the hospital or sleeping at her dorm. She wasn't particularly helpful with her advice.

“I think she’s had some big disappointments with men and needs a little special attention, which you don’t give her,” Anna said. She was handing out to me this half-baked advice as the three of us were enjoying a well-prepared dish of spaghetti and Swedish meatballs that Anna had cooked for us.

“How do you know this?” Marty asked her.

“We’ve had a few conversations.”

“But all I do is give her special attention,” I said, somewhat miffed by her accusation.

“Do you ever ask her how she’s feeling, I mean really feeling?”

“All the time.” The truth was that I didn’t give a damn how she was feeling unless it involved wanting to have sex with me. This was not a sentiment I could express to Anna, who would never understand how it might be possible not to like someone and still want to sleep with them.

“Lorraine is nice, Frank. You could do worse.”

Who could quarrel with Anna about anything? She was too decent, too good-natured. She passed along advice to me like an older sister who cared about her unfortunate, miserable brother because he didn’t understand human nature. Maybe this part of her personality was why she was training to be a nurse. I think she loved dealing with misery, that she’d probably be happiest if she were nursing in Africa where millions were dying daily from hunger and disease. Consider that last week I pulled a back muscle playing basketball. This marvelous young woman made me lie down every night after dinner and would gently massage the sore muscle. What a treat. What made her special was her uncommon insight into what ailed people, unlike Lorraine who only thought about herself.

“I wouldn’t mind giving Lorraine a try,” said Marty.

Anna laughed. “She’s too much of a woman for you.”

Before she sat down to eat, she put her arms around Marty’s neck and playfully kissed him on the ear. Being the odd man out with Marty and Anna was palatable only because of Anna’s recognition that the situation was uncomfortable for me and doing stuff like rubbing my sore back was her way of

easing the tension between us. However, I have to admit that watching her kiss Marty made me inwardly wince. The worst times were the nights on the living room couch while Marty and Anna enjoyed the large double bed in the bedroom. To their credit, they kept the sounds of their lovemaking to a minimum, which I liked to think might have been Anna's way of not wanting to hurt me. On those occasions when I wasn't around and they made love, Marty made it a point to tell me that Anna was wildly amorous. Like I needed to know that.

My only hope to straighten out my deteriorating nervous system was to entice Lorraine into bed with me. The breakthrough was the evening when I spent two weeks of food money and took her to the *Blue Note* in downtown Chicago to catch the Weavers, my favorite folk singers. We were holding hands and listening to Pete Seeger soaring in falsetto as he sang the *Wimoweh* when I broke down and told her that I loved her. On the ride back to Hyde Park on the El, I was rewarded for my romantic gesture when she playfully slid her hand inside my pants. Now the only problem was to sneak her into the apartment when Marty and Anna weren't around.

Why did I have to sneak? In the morning over toast and coffee, I told Marty that my relationship with Lorraine had taken a giant step forward and asked him if after work tonight he and Anna might want to spend some quality time at the University Tavern enjoying a few glasses of nice cold beer. Marty congratulated me with more enthusiasm than I thought was necessary and promised that Anna would sleep at her dorm and he would not return to the apartment before 1 AM.

That night Lorraine and I, with the apartment all to ourselves, successfully consummated our relationship with a tenuous, but nevertheless successful exchange of fluids. (Technically that wasn't exactly accurate since I managed to put on a rubber successfully, also a brand new experience.) I must admit it was a glorious moment for me when my inglorious member finally found its way into a woman's sacred chamber. When Lorraine swung her legs around me and squeezed me like a boa constrictor, I became a little dizzy from the excitement. "Frank," I said to myself, "you finally

made it.” After I climaxed, I lay on my back, a huge smile crossing my face, and thanked the God I didn’t believe in.

“I need your advice,” Marty said one evening after Anna had left for a late shift at the hospital. He mulled over the most recent letter he had received from Amy, his Boston College girlfriend, before he read it to me:

Dear Marty,

I haven’t heard from you in almost two weeks. It isn’t necessary to make any more excuses why you can’t spare a precious ten minutes to write to me. I know all about your wild, crazy actions. I want you to know that it hurts quite a bit when people come up to you and tell you that your boyfriend is living with a Russian woman in an apartment in Chicago. I always knew that you were a little wild but it seems that this year in Chicago you’ve let yourself go completely and become an animal. Wild Marty, that’s what I’m going to call you from now on. I thought that after this summer you wouldn’t have been so terribly frustrated that you’d have to run and find some older sophisticated woman so you could carry on like the uninhibited wild man that you have turned out to be. Maybe I’m no angel but at least I’m faithful and don’t go talking about things of such a delicate nature. Oh, it’s just like you, Wild Marty, to brag about your exploits to everybody so that even in Boston people know all about you and your Russian woman.

Another thing, last summer if we ever went out and bought even an ice cream soda you complained about the money, but now it doesn’t seem to faze you a bit to spend hundreds of dollars on records, and liquor and Russian women.

There doesn’t seem to be much point in continuing this letter. Perhaps I shouldn’t even send it but I want you to know that I know the whole truth about your crazy antics. I’m terribly hurt, Marty. I never thought that you would do a thing like this to me.

Incidentally, are you coming home during the holidays? Please write and let me know if you want to go out with me on New Year's Eve; otherwise I'll make other arrangements. Love, Amy

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Are you going out with her on New Year's Eve?"

"Who told her I was living with a 'Russian woman?'"

"I'd be happy to drive up to Boston and take her out on New Year's Eve. She's liable to be very nice to me."

I wasn't amusing him. He looked genuinely distressed, which surprised me since I thought he didn't give a damn about what Amy wrote. As it turned out, what worried him most was that Amy's information about this fictitious Russian woman might get back to his parents. I've known Marty Cohn since we started school together more than three years ago. He was a realist, not at all inclined to philosophize on what might be but rather on what is. When conflicting situations would arise, he would weigh the differences and make a decision, always to his advantage. His sense of morality depended upon whom the injustice was being inflicted, though if he were in any way responsible for that injustice, he would talk about guilt and atonement out of the side of his mouth. While he claimed to have a forgiving nature, he would, at the same time, try to avoid any situation that might require him to be compassionate. On the other hand, he understood the give and take of friendship and from the beginning we had this certain chemistry that seemed to inexplicably bond us, since he really was a selfish bastard. But to be honest, in those days I never measured people by any sort of moral standards. I liked Marty's style, his frankness and pomposity. He was always fun to be around.

The Jewish thing was important to Marty. He was raised in a kosher home and until his *Bar Mitzvah*, he would attend *shul* with his parents every Friday night and Saturday morning. When we first started hanging out together in our freshman year, I remember with what joy he would talk about no longer having to sit for hours in a *shul*, mindlessly reciting

prayers in a language he didn't understand. When I asked him on *Yom Kippur* if he was going to temple, he said, "That's all over for me." He spoke with such a vindictiveness, that it seemed almost as if he wanted the power of his rancor to surge across the one thousand miles that separated Chicago from Brookline as a reminder to his parents that he was now his own man, and if he didn't feel like going to temple on *Yom Kippur* that was none of their business. But not going to temple and marrying a gentile girl were two different matters.

When we talked about his parents, Marty told me that at the age of sixteen his father began to work at Rubin's deli on Harvard Street in Brookline. The job: washing pots, sweeping the floor, killing rats and taking out the garbage. The man possessed an immigrant mentality, and worked sixteen hours a day, six days a week, eventually becoming a counter man. For fifteen years he hoarded his money like a miser and during the Depression when housing prices fell to nothing and every other house was in foreclosure, he began to buy up property. By the time World War II started he owned a dozen houses, two stores and a movie theater. In 1950, Marty estimated that with the resurgence of real estate values, his father owned more than a million dollars in property. Marty, as an only child, would one day inherit all of his parents' assets. I knew from the very beginning when he fell in love with Anna Svensen that he would never risk being disinherited by marrying her.

The subject of marrying a girl who wasn't Jewish had first come up about a year ago when we were sitting around at the University Tavern enjoying a beer. Drinking with us was Harold Samuelson, a pre-med student from Los Angeles, who was an energetic political activist. When Harold wasn't studying, he'd hang out with Angie McGuire, a bright-eyed coed from New York, who was into Trotsky and world revolution. When the subject of marriage came up, Harold's response was, "Jesus, I'm only twenty. Who's thinking about getting married?"

"It's just a 'suppose' question," I said.

“Why would anyone want to get married and have a family when the Americans and the Russians were exploding atomic bombs like it was a big game? You see what’s going on in Korea? The world is on the brink of a nuclear holocaust?” With Harold, everything was measured in terms of world politics.

“What about you, Frank?” Marty asked me.

“I don’t know. I guess they’d be pretty upset.”

“So would you do it?”

“I think if I loved the girl, I’d still marry her.” It was easy for me to be hypothetical since there didn’t seem to be the remotest possibility that in the near future there’d be any girl, Jewish or gentile, who would want to marry me.

“That’s bullshit,” Marty said.

Harold piped in. “Just because you’re terrified of your parents, doesn’t mean that everyone else is,” he said to Marty. “For chrissake, this isn’t the 18th Century, Cohn. You gotta live your own fuckin’ life the way you see it.” Harold tended to curse a lot for emphasis when trying to make a strategic point in a conversation. In those days that seemed to be more or less the rule for political activists.

I pressed on. “So am I to assume that you would marry Angie, not necessarily right away, but say, after you graduate?”

“It’s a stupid theoretical,” Harold said. “Anyway, I doubt if Angie would ever want to marry me.”

“You’re avoiding the central issue here.”

“I already told you, asshole. I’d marry anyone I felt like marrying.”

Marty broke into the conversation. “You talk like this great liberal, Samuelson, but I think you’re full of shit.”

“Listen pal, I don’t wet my bed worrying about what my parents think.”

“Angie’s not only a *shiksa*, but a loud-mouthed commie,” Marty said. “Your parents would probably shoot both of you.”

“Why don’t you shut up, Marty? You don’t have the first idea about Harold’s parents,” I said.

“First Amendment, mister.”

“I happen to like Angie.”

“What does that prove?”

What would it be like to marry an outspoken, good-looking girl like Angie McGuire, I wondered? My parents prided themselves on their liberalism. (My father told me with pride that he had voted for Henry Wallace instead of Harry Truman in the '48 presidential election.) Still I had to wonder how they'd react if I wanted to marry a Catholic girl, no matter how bright and good-looking she was.

“You know, Samuelson, you're right about me in one respect,” Marty said. He hesitated then went on, “I'm not about to give up owning half of Brookline one day because of some juvenile romantic notion. After law school, I intend to take over my father's real estate operations. In five years I will triple his holdings.”

Harold took a long swallow and finished off his beer. “After listening to you, Cohn,” he said, “I'm going to puke and then I'm going to join the Party.”

“The Communists are a bunch of atheistic assholes,” Marty said.

“I thought you were also an atheist,” I said to Marty.

“I'm an agnostic, not an atheist. Who can be so sure about the existence of God? Anyway, what difference does it make? My parents don't care whether I don't believe in God. They only want to think that I'm a good Jew.”

“If Jews are agnostics,” said Harold, “then why do they spend endless hours praying in temples on Friday nights, Saturday mornings, *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur*, *Pesach*, *Chanukkah*?”

“Because they're Jews,” Marty replied.

I chimed in with the last word before we finished off our beer and went back to the dorms. “I've always respected my parents' feelings about their religious beliefs. Like with a lot of other Jews I've come to know over the years, you had to respect the ritualism that went along with calling yourself a Jew. With all my own arguments on the nonexistence of God, I've never denied being a Jew, which sounds a little contra-

dictory if you define a Jew as someone who believes in the Old Testament, which I do not. I believe that thinking of yourself as a Jew has a lot to do with being defensive against a world that throws Jews into gas ovens and crematoriums. The more the gentile world hates us, the greater becomes our need to cling together as a way of being stronger. I think that's why marrying a gentile represents a breach against the solidarity of the tribe and is so fiercely resisted by the older generation. Like Getrude Stein's, 'A rose is a rose is a rose,' I would add, 'A Jew is a Jew is a Jew.'"

When I asked Lorraine if she would marry a man who wasn't Jewish, she looked at me as if I were demented and said, "Are you proposing to me?"

At the time we were lying in bed, stretched out in the sort of relaxed, composed manner you feel after you've had a decent fuck. Marty and Anna had gone to the movies and we had the bedroom to ourselves for at least two solid hours before they'd return. For the past month since Lorraine and I started sleeping together, Marty and I have managed what amounted to a fair sharing of the bedroom. Now and then a situation would arise when circumstances dictated that we bend to immediate needs, For example, last week Anna's schedule allowed her an entire weekend off after five continuous days of being on duty until late in the evening. Marty asked me for exclusive rights to the bedroom for Friday and Saturday nights, a not unfair request. Lorraine gave me an attitude, not wishing to relinquish Saturday night to them. "Don't be a selfish bitch," I told her, a dangerous remark since it might cost me at the minimum a decent blow-job. I would have added, "We have to be reasonable, to compromise," but when Lorraine had a mindset, the word "compromise" was not a part of her vocabulary.

Lorraine's dislike of Anna had its origins that first night when I brought Lorraine back to the apartment and I couldn't take my eyes off of Anna. Now and then, Lorraine would make it a point to denigrate Anna. She would remind me, for

example, that a nurse's education was bound up in giving out pills and cleaning up shit. "I bet she's never read a serious book in her life. She probably thinks Aristotle is a city in Wisconsin." Who could blame Lorraine for being jealous of Anna? Though Lorraine had bigger tits, Anna was ten times sexier with her slinky body and sparkling eyes, not to mention that she was also a ten times nicer person than Lorraine. But if there was one thing I had come to understand in my relatively short twenty-one years of life, you've got to make the best of what you've got.

"I am not proposing to you," I replied. "I'm simply putting forward a minor hypothetical scenario."

"It's not so minor. It's the sort of problem that arises daily in thousands of couples. Not just with Jews. Last year the Greek parents of one of the girls in my physics class discovered that she was going with an Italian boy. They threatened to take her out of school. She almost had a nervous breakdown, but she finally buckled under. With me it's no problem, since I doubt if I'll ever get married."

"There's no man good enough for you. Is that it?"

"If you're not going to have children why would you want to get married? I hate kids. Babies drool, piss and shit all day. I would probably wind up drowning my kid in the bathtub if by some bizarre chance I ever happened to have one."

"Wow, what a sweetheart you are."

"You're like all men. You think that the only thing a woman ought to do in life is spread her legs for you and then happily face the miserable consequences of wasting her life chasing after a brood of miserable brats."

She gave my limp dong a little tug to remind me that Marty and Anna wouldn't be returning to the apartment for probably another hour. We had already done it twice and I wasn't in the mood to try for a new personal world's record of three orgasms in one hour. She tried snuggling up, rubbing her belly and tits against my body, and when she finally realized that her sexual charms weren't getting either one of

us any place, she rolled away with a grunt that sounded more porcine than human.

Since we had begun to sleep together, our relationship had taken a series of bizarre twists from what it had previously been. In order to get her into bed, I was Eisenhower planning D-Day. Once the troops were in control of the beachhead, it was no longer necessary to apply the same intensive energy into the operation. Of course, one had to be careful since there was always a danger of being counter-attacked and being thrown back into the sea. On her side of the coin, once she became willing to sleep with me, more or less on demand, our relationship outside of bed was no longer as harmonious. The more she sensed that I didn't love her, the more clinging she became. Sex became her primary means to get me to be loving and romantic. Lorraine was really not a very nice person. In fact I am forced to say that I considered her one of the most selfish, self-centered bitches with whom I would ever have the misfortune to have an intimate relationship. To disguise these feelings wasn't always easy, but I was a desperate twenty-one year old who had finally found the special pleasure of steady fornication.

"So what do you want to do?" she asked once she gave up on me and started to dress.

"You know, I've got sort of a headache. Would you mind if I walked you back to the dorm and we called it a night?" This was of, of course, blatant bullshit. I wanted: 1. to get rid of her for the rest of the evening in order to: 2. wait for Marty and Anna to return from the movies so that the three of us could sit around and listen to music and play honeymoon bridge.

She was on to me. The girl was too damn smart. "What do you mean you've got 'sort of' a headache? You've either got a headache or you don't have a headache."

"Okay, I've got a headache. Leave out the 'sort of.'"

I was creating a problem for her. To challenge my sudden malaise would suggest that I didn't want to be with her, that I didn't care about her. If she wanted to maintain her dignity,

she had no choice but to back down and accept my phony excuse to end the evening with her.

She did a bit of heavy-handed clinging to me as we walked across the Midway to the Quad. It was late November and you could already predict the onset of another bitter Chicago winter by the chilling wind that swept down the Midway from the lake. I obliged her by throwing a protective arm around her. To make the experience more palatable, I fantasized that we were obsessed lovers sharing a romantic moment in the bleakness of a dark, foreboding sky. At the entrance to her women's residence hall, I kissed her goodnight. Not exactly a sexy kiss, but slightly better than my usual goodnight peck. "Do you love me?" she asked.

As a rule we seldom threw the "love you" stuff around, but I was feeling a little guilty and answered her with a "Sure, baby, a lot." It was a cheesy response, but it was the best I could muster. Before she had a chance to get me to kiss her again, I turned abruptly and called back to her, "Call you tomorrow," then hurried down the path leading out of the Quad toward the Midway. I was home free.

It was almost eleven before Marty and Anna returned to the apartment. You could see that Anna was on edge as indicated by her quick step and unnatural reticence. The problem, as I was soon to discover, was that Anna didn't appreciate the letter that Amy had written to Marty, which he had shown to her.

"He wants my advice on what he should write back to her," Anna complained to me. "What is the matter with the boy?"

Why would Marty have shown Amy's letter to Anna? I suppose you have to understand Marty. He was the sort of person who needed to have it all for himself. ("Poor Amy, she loves me so much. Who will take her out New Year's Eve?") I suppose you'd have to believe that he wanted Anna to know that she wasn't the only girl in the world who loved him.

Anna appeared at a loss as to how to deal with Marty's strange behavior. Marty, on the other hand, seemed equally nonplussed as how to respond to Anna's irritation. "You're overreacting," he said to Anna. "She means nothing to me. Our relationship is done and finished."

"Why don't you just write her and tell her that," I said. I was butting into something that was none of my business—but not entirely unhappy in doing it.

"Who could have told her about my having a relationship with a Russian woman?"

"A bit of a conundrum, isn't it?" I said.

Anna gave me one of her offbeat smiles, a little flashing of white teeth and a crinkling of lines that ran around the sides of her mouth, which I suspect in her old age would cut deeply and define her as a person who liked to smile. "Conundrum? Sounds sexy," she said. "So what does it mean?"

"A problem where the answer is uncertain."

"Don't look so concerned, Frankie. I know about the Jewish thing. I'm working on it."

I would have liked to tell her that with me there would be no Jewish thing, that if I brought her home to my house, while my parents might initially react with some minor histrionics, they would never disinherit me. My mother was a terrific woman who spent half her life writing books in Braille for the blind, while my father practiced dentistry in the Ironbound section of Newark and always did a little extra for his working-class patients. They were both decent, intelligent people, and I was convinced that they would come to respect any decision I made about whom I chose to marry.

"Where's Lorraine?" Marty asked, changing a subject that needed changing.

"I told her I had a headache and walked her back to the dorm."

"I have some aspirin if you need it," said Anna, always the nurse ready to treat any ailment no matter how slight.

"Thanks, but I don't need an aspirin because I don't have a headache." What I didn't tell her was that I preferred being with her and Marty without Lorraine hanging around. Which

wasn't exactly the truth either. What I really wished was to be alone with her, not a truth I would ever be able to verbalize.

"I like Lorraine. I think you ought to be nicer to her, Frank," Anna said.

"She's a stuck-up bitch," chimed in Marty. "I don't know why you bother with her at all."

"Hey, you're talking about the woman I love," I said.

That night while Anna and Marty were in the bedroom finding reasons not to be angry with each other, I began to brood, an unhappy young man asking himself the question "Who the hell are you?" I went back to Descartes, "*Cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore, I am." But is simply recognizing one's own existence enough? What about understanding why you existed; what defined you as a human being? What made you unique? What made you unique, I told myself was that you loved your best friend's girlfriend while at the same time was sleeping with another girl, whom you disliked, so that you could bear being around the friend's girl. What kind of a conniving, rotten human being had you turned into? The worst part was that there was no way to change things. I was doomed.