

Anne McLean / NINETEEN SEVENTY-FIVE

Jean-Paul was haranguing her about politics again.

"Stop it!" she pleaded, and covered her ears with both hands but he kept on talking, so she tickled him. He was standing up against the kitchen door and just as she attacked his sensitive ribs he jerked both his arms back to catch her hands, and drove one elbow through the glass of the door.

"*Merde.*" The pieces fell musically. He examined his elbow for cuts. She ran to get the mercurochrome.

When the cold weather came he covered the hole with a piece of cardboard and some tape, and promised her he would fix it "next weekend."

When spring arrived she tore off the cardboard and let the wind blow through the kitchen. "It's wonderful to have ventilation without needing to open a window for it," she said.

He ignored the remark, smacking as it did of her southern Ontario sense of humour — without caring if it really did. It was a part of her he preferred to ignore. He buried his face in a book on the State by Althusser.

It was the same when the doorbell broke. He spent an evening designing a beautiful sign that said "Knock hard. *Frappez fort*, S.V.P." and attached it to the doorframe above the buzzer. But it didn't occur to him to look at the wiring. The thought of all those interweaving threads irritated him. She claimed they had fewer visitors after that.

He said, what did it matter? If it protected them from the women in her consciousness-raising group, he was all for leaving the doorbell permanently out of commission. She looked up from her sewing to say something sarcastic and stopped.

He was smoking a Gitane, curling his lips round it to draw in a puff, letting it dangle from his lower lip as he smiled at her. He had beautiful limp hands with long square-tipped fingers, and heavy-lidded eyes, very San Paku. He was the kind of man women feel few qualms about stealing from their girlfriends. She felt lucky that so many of the women she knew now called themselves lesbians.

"Pig," she said. He laughed, making the sound of a pigeon in his throat. She knew he was about to protest that he loved women.

"You know I think women are . . ."

"Untapped reservoirs of human potential." She finished it for him, with his own accent and a rotating motion of the hand. He got up and walked past her to the kitchen, sauntered back a moment later with a can of beer. He looked at her out of the corner of an eye; he had learned that to argue with her did no good, only made her more defensive and self-righteous. Ideas also failed to move her: he'd discovered early on that it was no use telling her that he didn't believe in monogamy on "political grounds," because she believed in it wholeheartedly and unquestioningly, on passionate grounds. He hoped it was only a matter of time before her outlook broadened sufficiently to admit that his vision was the only correct one. He was patient. Whenever he felt compelled to give in to his natural instincts he was careful afterwards to lie, to protect her feelings.

He changed the subject. "I've made a breakthrough with the neighbours," he said. "The woman next door. I've found out she has a very highly developed class consciousness . . ."

"You mean the one with the retarded son?"

"I don't think he's retarded."

"The kid who moons around the alley all day, stroking his guinea pig? You can't call that normal. He's at least 15. Sometimes he peeks in the window when I'm undressing."

"That's normal."

She hated when he laughed and looked at her like that. Presumptuously intimate, as if he knew all about her. She made a face at him.

"She's invited us to dinner sometime," he said.

"Oh no," she groaned, knowing she was bringing them dangerously close to another fight.

The neighbourhood was his great passion, his current project, a crowded, parkless, working class *quartier* almost without trees. He had insisted on their living there.

"You'll get used to it," he'd told her last August when they found the place, a three-and-a-half-room flat with no frig or stove, no heater, for 60 dollars a month. At first she'd been fearful. Her French was the most basic; she was blonde and unmistakeably English. She wasn't sure that she wanted to live in one of these shabbily little brick buildings which she had always found so charming — from the outside. The staircase was slippery in winter, crowded with neighbours' children in summer. Her first act had been to hang up thick lace curtains, inherited from her grandmother, on the door and the front window, so the family across the street couldn't see into the place from the balcony where they sat most evenings.

A few doors away was a Turkish bath owned by a well-known ex-wrestler, B  b   Tremblay. For the first few weeks she'd been afraid to walk alone outside after dark. She'd told Jean-Paul the grocer overcharged her because she was an *anglaise*.

"Wait," he'd said. "Once they get to know you, you'll be accepted."

At night she spied on them from her desk at the front window, the fat women with straight black hair glued to their heads in the heat, the stocky men with their quarts of beer, feet up, watching television beside open kitchen windows.

She often wondered, even now, why he would never let her just be, why he had to force her to live here. He had never loved her just for herself, for the little things she did for him, the daily domestic sacrifices. How she'd learned to cook with wine, just to please him! From the day they'd met he had set about grooming her to be worthy of his Master Plan. He had pushed her to the wall with his logic, his interminable analysis. He left her no choice, she had to disappoint him. How else to bring him back to his senses.

He was sitting listlessly at the desk, playing with the fringe of the lace curtains, staring at something in the street. She saw it was her moment.

"I've found a job," she said.

He turned his head slowly, as if he hadn't quite heard her correctly.

"I've decided I want to work as a topless waitress for a while, and work on my dancing. I auditioned last week, and they liked me."

She had expected him to shout at her, to run to the bookshelf and drag out all the feminist pamphlets he'd been giving her for her birthday and International Women's Day for the last two years, but instead he stared at her coolly.

"Is this really you talking?" he asked. "Or have you taken some kind of drug that's made you forget everything you've learned?"

She felt a tightness in her stomach, a real excitement at this, her first really open defiance.

"You paralyze me," she said, wondering if her voice sounded whining. He was chewing on his fingernail, watching her. "All this concern with the neighbours is just a cover for doing nothing. You've been out of school a year now. You're going nowhere."

He looked out the window, accustomed to these sudden personal attacks. She always resorted to them, they were her only weapon. He was preparing one of his careful responses, but she wasn't finished.

"You do nothing but think and read and talk to your friends. It's depressing to live like this. Maybe you think it's romantic not to have any furniture, to be stuck here miles from downtown and not be able to afford metro tickets, to have to pedal around on that bike you borrowed from Schonberg."

He stood up and his eyes were tired, as if they'd looked for too long at a horizon where nothing appeared. He walked out of the room.

"Schonberg called yesterday," she shouted after him. "He wants the bike back."

Before he left the flat by the back door (because it was not what she wanted, he thought to himself), he turned — she was standing in the hallway — and gave her a long smouldering look, with eyes that contained the whole indelible history of their fights, a film that one day he would play back to her. He clattered down the stairs, throwing his cigarette butt to the ground, and unlocked the bicycle from the hydro pole where it was chained.

Then he paused, thought better of it, leaned the bike against the side of the building and climbed slowly back up the stairs. Maureen was in the bedroom putting on make-up, the new little jars scattered over the table. Garish, he thought, but he said nothing. She pretended to ignore him, to be that absorbed in the operation.

Secretly he loved to see her look at herself in the mirror, especially when she thought he was asleep or not watching: how she used to study her body, from different angles and poses — sometimes with nothing on but a ragged pair of his jockey shorts. In the beginning he had devoted a lot of time to helping her overcome her coquettish, charm school seductiveness, telling her he liked to see her in her natural state. It disturbed him to see her reverting suddenly like this.

"Tell me," he said, coming up behind, putting a hand on her shoulder. "This strip club you're going to be working in — is it unionized?"

He saw her face in the mirror, ugly with contempt. She gathered the little bottles, the brushes, the bits of cotton, rushed with them into the bathroom and locked the door.

He looked at himself in the mirror, searchingly. He had said the wrong thing. He tilted back his head and narrowed his eyes. He pulled in his stomach muscles, studied himself from the side. He should run around the block, he hadn't done that for a week. Important to stay in shape now — in five years he'd be thirty. Then it wouldn't be so easy. He looked around the room for his sneakers. The last time, the street children had cheered when he came round the final lap, red in the face, dripping sweat. Clear they thought he was crazy for running on such a hot day. Today was another.

He sat down and began shuffling through some photographs on Maureen's table. He was in most of them, the centre of her world, not smiling, with his head thrown back often: the way he liked to see himself in the mirror. She was good at composition, but in some ways she still hadn't learned to handle a camera. He felt her portraits were two-dimensional. Here, for instance: she had made him look self-absorbed, dry, indifferent. But he knew he was not like that.

She was out of the bathroom now, fussing around in the next room, taking dishes from the drainer and putting them into the cupboard. He called to her from the bedroom.

"What's the name of this place, this club?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I think I have a right to know."

There was more clattering of dishes. "It's called the Pussycat," she said. "But I don't want you coming there, do you understand?"

He laughed. He was about to say it wasn't his type of hangout. Then he remembered Schonberg's bicycle, standing downstairs, unlocked, and he ran down without saying good-bye, leaving the front door banging slightly in the wind.

He pedalled out into the traffic and let it pull him east toward his friend Schonberg's house, though he knew instinctively that Schonberg would have little to say about this latest twist in his life with Maureen. Schonberg would smile his sickly little smile and shrug his shoulders. "Defeated, my friend, by the mysteries." Schonberg resorted to poetic evasions more and more, recently. "The lowest form of capitulation," Jean-Paul would call it. "Right in the tradition of the Jewish *vendu*." But these days Schonberg always smiled weakly. He'd lost the desire to think combatively, to fight. Sometimes Jean-Paul was disgusted at this betrayal of their friendship. And sometimes, looking at Schonberg, he couldn't stop himself from seeing him as a relic of a time that was already over, dead: as the watered-down survival of a race which had never belonged here, had always been parasitic, foreign, aloof. And seemed more so lately, as its presence faded.

Schonberg was in his study, listening to music. His desk was stacked with newspapers and magazines, books on economics.

"The bicycle?" he said. "No, I don't want it back. Keep it for a few more weeks."

Jean-Paul lit a cigarette and walked over to the bookshelf, skimming across the titles for something new. The section on Africa seemed to have expanded. He inhaled thoughtfully, reached for one of the books, a paperback on armed struggle in Angola. The author, French, was well known to him.

"Still flirting with the Trotskyists?" he asked, balancing the book on his palm, ironic. The question hung in the air flatly, so ritualized by now that it didn't need an answer. Schonberg turned away to change the record.

"How about Brahms?" he said and Jean-Paul said, "How about Wagner?" Schonberg laughed and made a face as if he smelled something bad. They both remembered the time, two or three years ago, when Jean-Paul had worked so hard to seduce Elana, using his Wagner records. A week later Schonberg had tried Brahms, with better results.

"I hate Brahms." Jean-Paul was at the desk now, looking out the window at the little house opposite — one of those old brick farmhouses that were at least a century old, which still survived in certain neighbourhoods. It gave him some sort of satisfaction to be able to look at that house through this window every time he visited Schonberg. "How's the article going?" he asked.

Schonberg shook his head. "It's not. I can't get the unions to co-operate with me." There was a silence. They both looked out the window.

"And how is Elana?"

"She's in the courtyard, working on the garden."

"I said how is she, not where is she."

"She's fine." He was looking at a framed photograph on the wall — a scene from the Algerian war. "How's Maureen?"

Jean-Paul was just on the point of sinking back in a chair and pouring out the whole story: that things were going unusually badly, that Maureen was threatening to do something really insane this time, when he heard Elana's voice from the hallway near the kitchen, and stopped. Information never stayed long in Elana's possession — she would have felt selfish, keeping news to herself. She would see it as her duty to pass it on to half her female acquaintances: "the women's community," she called them. In her eyes, when one individual's sanity wavered, the whole network was weakened. What anyone suffered, was everyone's duty to know about.

There she was, her ample body taking up half the doorway, her dark hair done up in little pigtailed. She always looked ridiculous in sundresses. It was Maureen who had pointed that out to him.

"I see you've brought back the bicycle," she said, and Jean-Paul was overcome with gratitude that fate had saved him from this woman two years ago, at a time when he must not have been in his right mind. She walked over and gave Schonberg a little kiss, which he accepted with nervous resignation. He seemed on edge these days, had become evasive, talked little. His hairline was receding more. Even Elana was worried, and had brought the problem up at her women's discussion group one evening during a lull in the conversation. But the group was going through a new phase of polarization: half the members announced that they were opposed to wasting meeting time talking about men. They told Elana to stop letting her boyfriend drain all her energy — why didn't she take karate instead, do something "for herself?" Elana hated when her group gave her advice, since she was by far the most politically evolved of any of them, and one of the founding members. She'd come home that night and complained to Schonberg, saying she was thinking of quitting and joining a Marxist study group instead. His eyes had lit up. He said it was an excellent idea; she was too advanced for the other women anyway, and it was time she outgrew her feminist stage. She accused him of paternalism and ever since they had been arguing about it often.

Now she lifted up the hair that Schonberg had carefully combed downward to hide the line of retreat. She kissed him again right at the shiny top of his forehead, and smoothed the hair down. She never had anything to say to Jean-Paul, so she turned and went back to the kitchen. "We're having supper early," she called to Schonberg. "I've got a committee meeting tonight."

The two men sat at opposite ends of the room for several minutes without speaking. Then Schonberg said, "You know, women are in an enviable position these days, Jean-Paul. They're optimists. They have energy."

Jean-Paul looked amused. "I don't know about that," he said, and was on the point of springing his incredible news on Schonberg, now as a sort of ironic footnote to it all, but he wasn't sure how to present it.

He felt that somehow he was being forced to take a new perspective on everything. Suddenly nothing seemed quite the same. He had lived with a woman for two years, as a student, and now as an unemployed graduate. He had assumed he knew her, but apparently he did not.

He had assumed a certain sequence of events would materialize in their lives, according to a logical pattern of change. Independence would come. He would have a job in some phases of the reconstruction. But maybe he had been wrong. Maybe there was no orderly evolution, no forward progression. In one afternoon she had regressed them both five years, dropped him ten floors, taken away his faith in the future. And here was Schonberg, admitting (without saying it directly) that he was a beaten man. It seemed everyone was on some different place on a large wheel, and when it turned you held on and prayed that when it stopped you'd have some place to stand.

He looked again at Schonberg. "My friend," he began, "how would you react if the woman you were living with suddenly announced she was going to do something that in your mind was completely contrary to everything you ever . . ."

Schonberg was watching him tiredly, as if he hadn't followed. Jean-Paul shook his head. "Oh nothing. Married life." He touched Schonberg's shoulder before he went out, wondering if they would have anything to talk about in the future. He left the bicycle on the back porch and walked home. The windows of their flat were dark, Maureen had gone to work — and rather than climb the stairs to their front door he decided to keep on walking. He turned west at the corner and headed downtown. It was half an hour before he realized where he was going, and then he was only a block or two away.

He found the street and saw the neon sign that said "Pussycat," over a logo of a woman with pointed ears and a long forked tail. The interior of the place was done in black and red, the lighting was red. It looked worse than it needed to. He thought he saw Maureen, standing by one of the tables. But the girl turned round and she was much thinner than Maureen. He thought of leaving but then he caught sight of her near the back. While she was ordering drinks at the bar he sat down at an empty table in her section.

She wasn't pleased to see him. She stopped a few feet from his chair, put a hand on her hip. The little tray on which she carried drinks was balanced at her waist. A silver cord attached to the tray encircled her neck so she could manage the tray with one hand and count change with the other. She was wearing a tiny pair of sequin panties and nothing else.

"Vous voulez quelquechose à boire?" she asked, indicating with a nod toward the door that he should get up and leave quietly.

He leaned forward in his chair, fixing her with that penetrating look he always used to such advantage in their arguments.

"You look absurd in that costume," he said.

She turned her head to see if the barman was watching.

"We're not allowed to talk with customers. What are you drinking? Make it quick."

"Why can't you be sensible?" he said. "These people are gangsters. You don't know anything about this kind of work. You're going to make a fool of yourself. You're too clumsy to be a waitress."

"Molson's?" she glared. "Coming up in a minute."

She whirled round and stubbed her foot on a chair. He laughed. She went and hid behind a lineup of customers at the bar. A minute or two later she came back with his beer, set it on the table in front of him. "You're just a piece of shit," she said. "That's a dollar twenty-five. Pay now."

"I wanted an O'Keefe." But he fished in his pocket for the money. Her eyes kept darting nervously to the bar. "If you knew what it does to me to see you like this," he said, and his glance dropped involuntarily to her breasts. He thought, "She's really pretty."

He drank his beer while she covered the other tables. He didn't take his eyes away from her for a moment, and he watched the customers' faces when they ordered drinks, to see if they looked at her face or at her body. If one of them touches her, he thought, there's going to be trouble. But none of them did. She stayed in the other section for so long that he got tired of looking for her in the dark. He relaxed a bit in his chair, and began looking at the other girls. They were Maureen's age or younger, most of them. A couple of them were as attractive as Maureen, but most, he thought, were not. One girl caught his eye particularly: small, vivacious, probably Québécoise. She laughed with the customers, seemed to enjoy the work. She looked as though she belonged here.

He began to relax a little. He studied the other men more carefully. He noticed they were more ordinary than he had first thought. He saw a group of college students in one corner. Some older men seemed on their way to night shift jobs — they looked and acted like regulars.

He ordered another beer. She brought it quickly this time, refusing to look at him. “When do you get off work?” he asked.

She laughed. “They all ask me that.”

She hurried to another table. He saw her joking with these men, and was unsettled to see how easily she handled herself. He leaned back in his chair and began to imagine how he would feel coming here every night. If his life became *that*, what would it be like? Was he so different from the other men here? Were they voyeurs, or did they come from ordinary motives — boredom, loneliness? He imagined Schonberg here, and it worked. He could picture him in a few years, sitting over by the jukebox. He laughed. It was a new idea and it almost made sense. A haven for defeated intellectuals. The only one who didn’t fit was Maureen: he didn’t want her to be part of the joke, the occasion of it all.

He drank two more beers and left after midnight. The metro was not running because of an explosion in one of the tunnels, so he walked home again. It took almost an hour and then he was too tired to have a shower, too tired to do anything but fall into bed.

At four he heard a cab door slam and Maureen’s footsteps climbing the metal staircase.

He would never forget how she slipped into the bed with him that morning, very quietly, believing he was asleep. It was humid and the sheets were damp; her skin was moist from her bath. She pressed close to him, putting her lips against his shoulder, and began to cry. There was a new quality about her body, a tension, a hardness, which he felt when he held her. It had never been there before, he realized with surprise. He would never quite manage to make it go away.

LIFE ON THE ROOF

The other day Harold Krassner was sitting in my kitchen and, as usual, I was feeding him some combination of beans and rice, and doing my best to ignore him. As usual, he was watching me through his thick little glasses and working his jaws in that deliberate, conscious way he has of chewing. And looking just like the balding little gossip-monger that he is and always will be.

I was thinking that my kitchen needed a bit of paint. Tongues of green enamel hung down the wall above the stove, thickly coated with the grease of previous tenants.

"Who were these previous tenants?" asked Harold, as if it interested him profoundly.

"I don't know," I said. "Spaghetti worshippers." It wasn't long since I'd managed to scrape up the last traces of their rituals.

"More beans?" I asked, breaking our train of thought. Harold eyed me strangely. With Harold I always have the odd impression that he wants something from me.

As I heaped his plate full of beans, I couldn't help thinking (and not for the first time, either) that Harold is an eloquent example of science gone wrong. With his astounding memory bank, he knows exactly how to manipulate facts and half-truths about his friends, in order to uncover more facts and half-truths about their friends, and their friends' friends. In his quest for greater and greater unities (as he calls them), he especially gravitates to weak little individuals whom accumulated resentment has made loose in the tongue.

In his spare time he designs and builds chemistry sets.

"What do you think of all the fires recently?" he asked suddenly. He was trying to engage me in an exchange of neighbourhood gossip in the hope of catching me off guard and inducing me to reveal something interesting and *Verboten*. But fires — what is there to say about them. Fires are a way of life around here. In fact this neighbourhood is slowly burning to the ground, building by building.

"What do you mean, what do I think about the fires?" I retorted.
"What is there to think?"

"Well," said Harold, "some people are saying the fires are just a passing fad, that the landlords are only going through a phase, setting fire to their buildings in order to work out the frustrations of being landlords. In a few years, they say, they'll have found something else to distract them."

"So?"

"So, what do you say?"

"I say, don't blame the landlords."

"Don't blame the landlords? Blame the tenants, then?"

I could see that he had his heart set on an argument.

"Don't blame the landlords," I repeated. "They're only the middlemen. Oh, they may be the ones who call up the professional arsonists. They may be the ones who, at a low level, start the ball rolling. But behind them there's a prior cause," I said, "greater than any landlord, at whose existence we may only shyly hint."

"I hope you're not talking about Divine intervention," said Harold Krassner.

"I am not," I said. "I'm no religious fanatic. But even a fool could see it's our way of life around here that's causing all the combustion. Take our friends for example. Failures in every sense of the word, but for this neighbourhood, average characters. Their houses could burn down fifty times over and they still wouldn't know how to control themselves. Or take Valerie . . ."

I saw him suppress a shudder of excitement when I mentioned that name. I stopped.

"Yes?" he ventured. "What were you going to tell me about Valerie?"

He looked down at his hands, which were neatly folded beside his plate.

"What makes you ask that?" I said.

"Oh, nothing." He smiled, in his feeble, dishonest way. "I see that in a letter to her a couple of years ago, you said she was going to ruin everyone's life with her double-dealing."

I didn't recall ever having said that.

"You've been reading my letters to Valerie?" I said. "Where did you get hold of them?"

"She handed them over of her own free will. She thought they might help me to understand you."

It was just the sort of thing Valerie will do, after talking for hours about how much she values loyalty in friends.

"I think you'd better leave, Harold," I said. "I'm starting to feel very aggressive toward you."

"Why?" he asked, putting on his little woollen hat (I don't know why he wears it in this weather). But he didn't get up from the chair.

"Leave," I said.

"Why?" he said, as he hurried out the door.

It's strange that even a short little visit from Harold Krassner is enough to set my nerves on edge for the rest of the day.

A firetruck shrieked past the window. I always cringe when a firetruck goes by. Moments later there was a knock at my back door.

A woman was standing there, smiling brightly. A little too brightly. She was panting as if she had just been running hard. That wasn't like Valerie. I let her in, knowing I was making a terrible mistake. But sometimes I can't help myself.

Another firetruck came screaming by, and Valerie's smile seemed to twist like something screwed on. She burst into tears and collapsed in the chair which was still warm from Harold Krassner's recent presence.

"Andrew's back from the boats," she sobbed.

I've never liked that mountain-climber, Andrew. He is the loud, sea-faring, masculine type, and every time he comes home from the boats, something stupid happens.

"Well, that's nice," I said. "After two months you must be very happy . . ."

"It's not nice," she said, flashing me a nasty look. "He got home unexpectedly and saw Harold Krassner's undershirt dangling from the bedpost. He bought a knife and he says he's going to stab Harold and burn my apartment down."

"What a funny coincidence," I said. "Harold was here only fifteen minutes ago. In fact he just went home."

"What was he doing here?" she demanded.

"Oh, just the usual things. He was eating and trying to pry information out of me."

She seemed not to hear. She was listening to the firetrucks. She jumped up and ran to the door.

"Those firetrucks are probably headed for my apartment!" she screamed.

When Valerie screams like that, it makes me want to scream. But for me, screaming is a last resort only. I save it for attacks, assaults, and when small animals cross the street in front of cars. So instead of screaming my response in Valerie's face, which is what I felt like at that moment, I tried to say something reasonable.

I said, "When did you last see Andrew?"

She was putting on her coat. "Half an hour ago in the restaurant!" she screamed, grabbing a hold of my arm. "Let's get going!"

"No, let's sit down and think a minute," I suggested. I could see she found this approach very boring. "Let's be rational," I said. "He can't be going to burn the place down. Why would he? He lives there. His mountain climbing equipment is there."

"It's much too late now to start thinking!" she shouted. "I already tried to calm him down. I threw my wine in his face in the restaurant, in front of the waiter. But you can't reason with him when he gets like this. He's capable of anything."

She was helping me into my coat.

"I think you're making a mountain out of a molehill," I panted, as we raced along.

It was a windy night. Our clothes flapped against our bodies as we ran, and the wind rustled in the plastic-covered windows of burned-down buildings. On either side of the street the stores and garment factories were silent and dark, and newspapers blew along the sidewalk like dirty white cats.

As we ran I remembered the time I spent the night in Valerie's spare room, as a favour to her because she always complained of feeling nervous alone in her apartment at night. Andrew chose that occasion to come home from the boats. I remembered crouching in the bedroom while he yelled "Open up, you bitch!" during one of their wild fights, in which she locked herself in the bathroom. I remembered how he had chopped down the bathroom door with his mountain climbing axe.

Andrew is the direct, physical, outdoorsy sort. He dislikes Valerie's friends and calls us "a bunch of anemic intellectuals." He thinks we are intellectuals, for some reason.

"You have no idea how jealous he is," Valerie was saying. "And he's been living with those sailors and learning how to use a knife."

That Andrew.

She was also worried about Harold. "I just hope he'll have the sense to run around to the alley and lock himself in his apartment."

"How could he know he was supposed to do that?" I asked. "He has no idea that Andrew is coming to stab him."

"Just keep running," ordered Valerie. "Your pessimistic talk could ruin everything."

We had arrived at her door. There were as yet no firetrucks parked on the street or in the alley.

"He must be in there," she whispered, meaning Andrew.

Harold and Valerie both live above a photography store beside an old tombstone maker. You can walk out of Valerie's back door across the roof of the store, and right into Harold Krassner's kitchen. Their dwellings are so close together that if a fire were to start in Valerie's apartment, Harold's would burn to a crisp in no time. And *vice versa*. In fact this fateful proximity was the cause of their liaison in the first place.

We stood on the sidewalk, gazing straight up at the window, where a light was burning brightly. Perhaps Andrew was now crouching, up in that room, just a bit beyond the windowsill, brandishing his pack of matches. Perhaps Harold's apartment, hidden behind Valerie's, was already a roaring inferno. After five minutes of gazing up thinking about all this, my neck began to hurt.

But Valerie said she had a plan. The only hope as she saw it was for both of us to go up to her apartment together and talk Andrew out of his destructive rage. I didn't relish the thought, but out of loyalty I agreed to her plan. She unlocked the first door, the street door. I followed her up the stairs. She unlocked the second door, the one that opened into her kitchen. We paused as it swung open and banged against the gas heater.

"Andrew!" she called sweetly. Her voice travelled through the empty apartment.

Andrew's skis and mountain climbing ropes were in their usual place beside the space heater. Nothing had been destroyed, and Andrew did not come bounding toward us to stab us to death. But there was a feeling of Andrew in the place, like fresh, dirty footprints.

We sat down in the kitchen to think matters over.

"Well," said Valerie, "all I can say is, I'm sure I turned the lights out before I left with Andrew this evening."

That could mean only one thing: that Andrew had come back here to get his knife, and left again without remembering to turn the lights off. Which suggested to me that Andrew was probably next door now, stabbing Harold as a dark prelude to burning Valerie's apartment down.

But neither Valerie nor I felt like stating the obvious. It seemed so much more pleasant to go on sitting there, like the old friends we were, and let the men sort things out for themselves next door.

"I'm sorry to be dragging you into this," said Valerie.

"Forget it," I reassured her. "I know you can't help it."

There was a pause as we savoured our years of friendship and the many episodes just like this one. Then a dark thought crossed my mind.

"Valerie," I said gently. "Why did you give my letters to Harold Krassner to read?"

A hint of a smile played over her lips.

"You know I can't refuse that man anything."

I understood that she viewed her relationship with Harold as somehow sacred.

"But don't you think it was an obscene betrayal of our friendship?" I added, as an afterthought.

"I hadn't considered it from that angle," she admitted.

"Why not?" I snapped. I was feeling petulant and double-crossed. "You've become one of his patients, I suppose?"

The instant I'd said it, I was sorry.

"He was helping me with my problems," said Valerie, hurt and defensive. "He's such a good listener. But he was starting to find out too much."

"So you put him on to me!" I felt a weak surge of outrage.

"You know the only thing that distracts him is information," she said.

I sighed, and sighed again. I was too exhausted to argue.

"Isn't it time we went next door?" she asked, in a soothing voice. I found myself agreeing to her auxiliary plan, which was as follows:

I would go around to the alley where Harold Krassner lived. I would break down Harold's front door while Valerie crossed over through her back exit and broke down his back door. Her idea was to create as much excitement as possible, in case Andrew had not yet stabbed anyone, but was still intending to.

When I reached Harold's porch in the dark smelly alley, I found a small light burning above his door. I could just make out a little poem scrawled in black ink on the plywood above the lock: Someone was threatening to send a pack of crows after him. Hanging separately by a piece of string was a tiny legless plastic doll with a man's head and one arm, and another note in stilted handwriting which read, "Harold you shall die." I gathered that a couple of his other patients had been by while he was out.

I hated resorting to brutality but I knew I had to. I grabbed the doorknob with both hands and threw my weight against the plywood door. It didn't give a centimeter. So I banged on it with both fists and screamed for whoever was inside to open up.

"OPEN UP! OPEN UP! OPEN UP!"

When the door swung back I was surprised to find myself face to face with Valerie, who was smiling the same bright smile she had in my kitchen. I knew it could mean only trouble.

Harold and Andrew were both seated behind her, at Harold's table, drinking tea. Valerie motioned me to the centre of the room. I grinned at them all.

"Oh, hello Andrew," I said casually. "Back from the boats, are you?" I felt dizzy. I noticed Harold Krassner's face was blank and expressionless, although his eyebrows had escaped his control and seemed to have risen an inch above his glasses. His forehead was all bunched into tight little wrinkles between his brow ridge and his little woollen hat.

For a second or two time stood still there in Harld Krassner's kitchen, with its crummy overstuffed sofa leaking kapok on the floor and its glassy rows of vitamin jars and brewer's yeast containers, and its looming ancient appliances which Harold had painted a dull black.

And its half-finished chemistry sets, lying everywhere on shelf and floor.

Then suddenly Valerie came to life beside me, and screamed.

"I SMELLED SMOKE A MINUTE AGO IN MY APARTMENT!"

My horror was tinged with the old admiration as she burst into tears and jumped across the kitchen at Andrew. She threw herself on him and slapped his face very quickly. His glasses sailed across the room and landed on the gas stove.

"My glasses!" he shouted, blinded. "You bitch!"

He unfolded his incredible height from the chair and tried to grab her but she kicked him.

She used the opportunity to fly out the back door and across the roof to her apartment.

I picked up Andrew's glasses and handed them to him gingerly. I felt more than grateful that they were not broken. I thanked God that they were not broken. He put them on without a word and bolted out the door to the alley where his car was parked.

"I'll be back!" we heard him shout, or some such empty threat, before he roared away into the night.

Harold and I crossed the roof and went next door to comfort Valerie.

"I'm sorry," she said, when she was calmer. "I always lose my head when I smell smoke."

I sniffed the air just to make sure. I couldn't smell any smoke. But Harold was reassuring.

"Don't worry," he said. "Studies have shown that your chances of dying in a fire are only slightly higher than your chances of being struck by lightning."

This statistic made Valerie feel much better. For an instant she beamed at Harold with a degree of admiration I had rarely seen in her eyes before. It was an intimate moment for them, and I was bitterly conscious of my irrelevance in it.

All the same, I had to ask.

"Valerie," I said, "why did you lie about the smoke?"

She laughed suddenly. She laughed so strangely and for such a long time that I began to feel uncomfortable.

I excused myself and said I had to be going. It's getting late, I explained. I edged away from her where she was standing against the wall in the hallway, beside Andrew's hooks, ropes, and other climbing gear, laughing as if she would never stop.

Harold was still wearing his uneasy little smile. He had not yet taken off his hat. As I moved toward the door he blinked at me once or twice, behind his thick glasses, and began to giggle silently.

"Odd," I thought, groping my way down the dark staircase to the bottom. "Very odd. You'd be inclined to think they engineered all this just to amuse themselves."

In a second I was back standing in Valerie's empty kitchen.

"There's something I'd like to ask you," I said. Someone nudged open the bedroom door a crack.

I swallowed hard. "Did you," I said, "did you arrange all these events just to humiliate me?"

"Humiliate you?" I heard Valerie's giggle in the background, but Harold's voice oozed with genuine concern. "Humiliate you? We're your *friends*!"

"I know," I said. I found myself fighting back strange emotions and a desire to destroy them both. "I know you're my friends. But why are you always dragging me into your distasteful private debacles. You act as if I were blind or deaf or invisible, or not quite human in your estimation."

I paused. There was silence in the bedroom. I was standing with my lips near the crack in the door.

"Of course," I went on, "I can appreciate how you must feel, living so crowded together here. Passion always fidgeting in the backs of your minds, like rats in the walls, and all that. But why involve me?"

A pregnant silence.

"I who know nothing of real pain . . ."

No answer.

"I never asked for the privilege of holding the matches you're always tossing into the tinder of your stupid, overgrown lives."

Stillness in the bedroom. Then all of a sudden, a burst of applause. Then Valerie came running out the door in her flimsy slip and threw her arms around me.

"That was a wonderful speech you just made," she gushed. "Very eloquent. You finally admitted you're one of us."

I felt a complicated impulse to sob joyfully and also to recoil in disgust.

Harold Krassner came out too, smiling brightly, still wearing his hat.

"Yes, at last you've joined the human race!" he exulted. "You've confessed your deepest feelings. What you said was really classic!"

"What do you mean?" I said. "Every word of it was true."

"You pathetic little schizoid," said Harold Krassner. "You've described your problem to a T. Chronic impotent spectator. That's you. What a breakthrough! Valerie and I are so pleased!" He held out both his arms and came running forward to embrace me.

"Don't touch me!" I screamed, springing back toward the water heater.

"It's all right," he said. "I've seen so much human failure over the years, by this time I'm immune to it."

"No you're not!" I shouted. "You're a carrier!"

I hurtled past them both and flung open the door.

"And don't imagine, Harold Krassner," I shouted up at them while I crashed down the stairs, "that you'll ever spend another night at my place as long as you live!"

I heard the echo of their insane laughter long after I had slammed the downstairs door and disappeared up the street.