

Shamsky and Other Casualties · Robert Cohen

AFTER THE EVENING NEWS, I have a long talk with my seven year old boy. He wishes to understand why I, or any adult person for that matter, would willingly subject myself to half an hour of something which provokes in me the sort of behavior one normally associates with middle linebackers and the criminally insane. He is a cheerful, sharp-nosed little boy, with the olive skin and dark forceful eyes of a Mediterranean prince. These he gets from his mother. From me he gets his curiosity, his temper, and what pass for his values. "Why are you so mad at the President, Jack?" he asks in a reasonable tone. "What'd he do that was so bad?"

And so I explain to my son, with carefully chosen phrases and emphatic gestures, all about unemployment and militarism and humorless fanatical moralists running roughshod over a vacuous electorate. *Really?* He did all those things? Somebody should shoot him!" (He has also inherited from me a melodramatic naiveté much more suited to his age than mine.) "But how come they can do all that stuff? Can't someone stop it?"

"I don't know, sport. Maybe in time *you* will." I kiss him on the forehead. His face brightens. "Now, get out of here, go play with your friends."

"Right, Jack." He rushes off, pulling on a grey sweatshirt.

"Wait a minute, sport. What *aren't* you going to do this evening?" I ask this in a school-marmish tone that makes even me wince.

His sweatshirt tangled thickly around his neck, my son responds matter-of-factly. "Kill birds with rocks." Several months ago, encouraged by his pals, he threw a small rock at one of the local bluejays, which consequently died.

"Why won't you?"

"Because I'm not a fash-hist!" he declares, racing out the door. I am satisfied with him, with myself, and even—now that the news is over—with the world at large. I am thirty-eight years old. I live in the hills of Oakland and work in the private sector. I am trying to be a good provider. I undertake minor chores around the house—fix appliances, tighten bolts, replace worn washers, fight innumerable small battles against domestic decay. It is not such a bad life. I have adjusted, seven o'clock rages notwithstanding, to the times.

And yet, maybe I haven't. For often, on summer nights like this, as I gaze off into a sunset already half-obsured by the eastward-creeping Pacific fog, my thoughts jerk restlessly backwards—or perhaps only sideways—and I find myself eulogizing, to no one in particular, the fallen Shamsky, the finest canvasser ever to ring a stranger's doorbell.

The first I heard about it was back near the beginning of March. It was evening, dishes were rattling in the kitchen, and I was going over some reports for a client I didn't like. Sylvie appeared at the door of the study, twisting the dishtowel in her hands into a tight knot. She cleared her throat. "Telephone," she said.

"Well, who is it?" I asked this even as I picked up the receiver, which, to tell you the truth, I hadn't noticed ringing. I'm a fairly intense concentrator, or so Sylvie—who hadn't moved from the doorway—likes to tell me. "Yeah?"

"Jack, it's me." The familiar absurdity of this understatement pinched me right in the heart. I glanced quickly towards the doorway.

"Hello, Girlfriend," I said, my voice shaking just a little. "What can I do you?"

"Listen Jack, I think maybe you should come over here." Her firm tone belied the 'maybe.' "Something's wrong with Shamsky. *Very* wrong—I mean he's like a corpse or something. That's why I'm calling."

"What does she want?" Sylvie asked.

I put my hand over the receiver. Just for the hell of it, I told her the truth.

"I'll *bet* she wants you to come over!"

"Jack? Are you there? Have you heard me?"

"I heard you. Listen, he's probably just hung over or something. Probably nothing to it."

"Jack, don't be stupid. He doesn't drink."

This was true, in fact. Shamsky wasn't a drinker. Never even *tasted* the stuff, not even during this past spring, when everything got so bleak. Not that I didn't urge him to. In my opinion, which used to be worth something around here, it would have helped matters somewhat. "Well then, maybe he's sick. What are his symptoms?"

Girlfriend snorted impatiently. "Symptoms? Symptoms! How about total inertia. How about not saying a word to me or anybody else for three weeks. How about cancelling all the magazine subscriptions. You want to

read hate mail? You should see what they're writing him, Jack."

"What who writes him?"

"You know, *Nation*, *Partisan*, *Mother Jones*. Also *Commentary*, *National Review*, *Dissent*; you name it, everybody up to and including *Sports Illustrated*. The Right is more conscientious, of course, but the Left can be very nasty. *The Militant* threatens reprisals. And it doesn't even faze him. All of a sudden he's too busy watching the Flintstones to take notice. Jack," she said, her voice pitched high with emotion, "I wouldn't call you if it wasn't serious. Come on over, okay? He listens to you."

"But Girlfriend," I protested, watching Sylvie squeeze the life out of the dishtowel, "he *hates* me. We haven't said two words since Saigon fell. Besides, I've got work to do. My boss thinks I'm a goof-off as it is."

Sylvie nodded soberly, adding to the consensus. She smiled without warmth. I could hear the distant cries of boys down the street as robins, woodpeckers and bluejays ducked for cover.

"Jack, I'm not going to beg for christ's sake," she said, hanging up.

"Hmmm," I said, to fill the ensuing silence.

Sylvie, a pretty intelligent woman, said nothing, eyeing me carefully. She holds an inconsistent belief in avoiding unpleasant subjects. I say inconsistent because she herself doesn't really practice it, though she urges it on others. Me for instance.

But at work the next morning, instead of settling down to client files, I pushed back from my desk and reflected on what might be wrong with Shamsky. Health? He had the figure of a Michelangelo statue, no vices, a vegetarian diet, and a jogging regimen like an Olympic runner. No, not health. And not money, either. Girlfriend had some inheritance, and the two of them lived like monks.

Girlfriend. She hadn't always been an unpleasant subject. It was the night of Nixon's resignation, the Sebastiani flowed freely, and we, the staff of United Citizens in Action (UCA), had given ourselves over to boisterous singing, drunken boasting, and, in the spirit of shackles newly-broken, erotic byplay. In the outer office, Perlmutter danced a lewd tango with Fat Maxine. Bando had Rhonda backed against the filing cabinet and was running through his Elmer Fudd impression. Levine walked around in one of his party depressions, acting surly and quoting Mao. The Sony was belting out some Santana, and a lot of people were coming in off the street, attracted by the noise, the high spirits, and the prospect of a free

drink or two. Hickey, who had just announced his *own* resignation (he was leaving to farm melons, or it may have been scallions, in Arcata) led us all in a number of mock-formal toasts: to Sam Ervin, to the Plumbers (this conducted in Spanish), to the L.A. Rams. Bando countered with toasts to Grace Slick, Jerry Lewis, and the Oakland Raiders. Several of the crashers ventured their own tributes, most of them well to the left of coherent. By midnight we had thanked both houses of Congress, most of the National Football League, assorted celebrities, and the closest relatives of practically everyone in the room, and even Levine was beginning to smile. Girlfriend, chipper in her green fatigues and peasant blouse, cheeks flushed and glasses steamed with our victory, came up from behind and hugged me around the waist. "Where's our boy?" I asked, leaning back against the warm comfort of her upper body. But I knew where. Convinced that it was, as he called it, "the best, the consummate night for a canvass," Shamsky was hoofing it door-to-door a half-mile away—striking while the iron was hot, as I'd taught him. Behind me Girlfriend swayed to the music, her hands resting knowledgeably around my stomach. "Y'know, I miss you sometimes, Jack," she said like a purr. Before I could reply, Levine skulked by, nibbling a brownie. "Be aggressive, not retiring," he lectured. "Prepare the way to Heaven." Alice passed around a pipe full of Lebanese hash. Girlfriend and I both took a little, then stood looking at each other almost sheepishly.

The result was a glorious night in the Emeryville Holiday Inn. You can read about it in Girlfriend's article, "Adultery and the Left: The Dialectics of Liberation," published in *Seven Days* a few years back. That's where Sylvie read it. I'm not sure *when* Shamsky heard, or from whom, but the day before Saigon fell he charged into the office with two Saturday Night Specials from the corner pawn shop and challenged me to—that's right—a duel. "We'll have to hunt up some bullets," he said apologetically. "They were out of them down there."

Of course I talked him out of it. I wasn't his mentor for nothing. But it was our last conversation.

I finally put Girlfriend's distressed phone call out of my mind and busied myself with small distractions, attending parties, playing tennis. It was a new era, and my backhand was getting to be an embarrassment. So I concentrated. Only, a few weeks later, Levine showed up at the door wearing one of his wretched flea market sport jackets and a face like Ed Muskie.

"Jack, I'm interrupting, maybe? Say the word and I'm gone."

"Don't be silly, Levine. Sylvie's at jazzercise, the kid's in bed. Come in already."

"You sure I'm not interrupting."

"I'm sure, dammit." He was, and he looked terrible, to boot. "You look terrible. What's the matter, you lose at the track again?"

"Who can afford the track anymore? I'm lucky I can dress myself."

"You call that dressing yourself?"

Levine's brown eyes flashed. "Excuse *me*, Mister Impeccable-Taste-with-the-Fat-Salary. You used to dress like this yourself, before the big turnaround."

"*Again*, Levine? Again with the resentment and name-calling? Again with the simple-minded labeling? Again wi—"

"All right, all right, don't get so defensive," he grumbled. "Never mind about all that. Methinks he doth protest too much, but . . ." He watched my fists begin to clench, then clucked his tongue. "Never mind. How about a drink for the civil servant?"

He had been a good canvasser, in his day. Five years on the streets, and if he hadn't ruptured that Achilles tendon in a touch-football game, who knows how far he could have gone? A moody, driven man. Now he worked for Unemployment, in Records, and spent most of his free time either gambling recklessly or filling out applications for any number of exotic research grants he wasn't qualified for. I brought out some scotch, poured a couple stiff ones, and went into the study with Levine, who seemed even more depressed than usual.

"So guess who I run into at Lucky's the other day, Jack." He sighed heavily, taking off his shoes. I let a moment pass. "Slottman. Mark Slottman. Remember?"

"Slottman?"

"You know. He was with us in FSM. Played the banjo. Owned his own bullhorn."

"That guy who tried to feel up Angela Davis during a rally?"

Levine was pounding his upper thigh. "That's him! Sure. Another Jewish boy with a fantasy, eh? He's got a couple brats now, lives in Hayward. A dentist. He tells me in Lucky's that his father was a dentist, his grandfather was a dentist, and it was probably in the back of his mind all that time we were running around with Mario that *he'd* turn into a den-

tist. So much for free will, Jack, eh? Anyway, we talked old times for awhile. Christ it felt good.”

“Why so sentimental, Levine? Drink your Chivas.”

“I’m turning into an unhappy person, Jack, I think.”

I shrugged and said nothing. He had *always* been an unhappy person, but never mind. I’d have liked to do something for him, but I wouldn’t have known where to start.

“Guess who else I ran into, Jack.” He paused. That slow pitch used to work well with housewives and cops, but it cost him in the welfare neighborhoods. “Girlfriend. She tells me there’s som—”

“Something wrong with Shamsky,” I said impatiently. “I know all about it, she called a while ago.”

“Sounds pretty serious, you ask me. The magazines and everything. Missed all those shifts at work, and you know him—with the flu, he worked; when we flew east for the Moratorium, he worked. Hell, he worked the night Nixon resigned.” I shot him a look, but he ignored it. “I’m a little worried about that kid, Jack. I don’t like it.”

The implication, of course, was that I *did* like it. “Whattaya want me to *do*, Levine?” It came out of me like an explosion. “You want me to play nurse to Shamsky, just cause he’s feeling down? Since when am *I* responsible for him? Besides, I’ve got a lot of work—”

Levine snickered. “Work? This is work? This—”

I cut him off before he could get rolling. “There’s work, there’s this house to maintain. Plus a wife to keep happy, and a kid who kills birds in the backyard. Him I’m supposed to teach morals. You think it’s all so easy? You think I’m a bastard?”

Levine drained his glass. “Yeah.” Then he got up, pulled his shirtsleeves down under that moth-eaten coat, and made for the door.

“Levine! Wait a minute, dammit!”

But he wouldn’t. “Prepare the way to heaven, Jack,” he tossed over his shoulder, disappearing into the darkness outside.

I switched on the television and went toe-to-toe with the eleven o’clock news.

He had been a great one, Shamsky. A phenom. When he showed up at the UCA office that December morning in ’68—a lean, broad-shouldered kid fresh off the Santa Cruz jitney, cheeks smooth, hair cropped short, on

his back a faded red nylon rucksack full of Marx, Weber, Marcuse and the rest; this large, almost feminine mouth pursed into a smile so rich with good intentions it made your eyes water—I figured he'd last about two weeks. Canvassing is hard work, Marx or no Marx. Still, there was something winning in his manner, a kind of halting charm, and as I walked him around the office to meet the staff—Perlmutter, Hickey, Rhonda, Fat Maxine, Bando, Levine, and some others, now forgotten—I was struck by how courteous everyone seemed to be around him. None of the sarcastic quips, or the outright condescension that usually went along with meeting a new man. With one exception. “And this is our publicist, Ruthie. Sweetheart, this is Harold Shamsky. He's training with us today.”

Ruthie, crumpling an empty pack of Benson and Hedges, gave him the once-over as he stammered something to the effect that he preferred to be called Shamsky, just Shamsky. His words tumbled out gently and a bit tentatively, as if they were reluctant to exit that stunning mouth of his too quickly. “Okay, Shamsky-just-Shamsky. I'm Ruthie-just-Ruthie, and welcome to the good fight.”

He nodded, started to say something, then thought better of it. I led him over to the TOTALS board and chalked in ‘Shamsky’ on the bottom line. “Okay, kid, for tonight I don't want you to worry about an amount. Normally you should aim for fifty a night, minimum. You don't average at least that much, you won't be asked to stick around. Understand?”

He nodded some more, fumbling with his rucksack. He withdrew a small blue notebook, the price tag still on the cover.

“Commission's thirty per cent. It's not much, but it'll keep you alive, if you live cheaply, until the revolution comes.”

More nods. I should mention that I was at least partially aware of how much I sounded like a grade-B drill sergeant at the time. According to Ruthie, “if Trotsky was as much of a hard-ass as you, Jack, they'd have done him in much earlier.” But we did see it as warfare, of a kind—we were the people's army; Nixon, Mitchell, General Motors, landlords, and industrial polluters were the Czars; and the streets were our battlefield. Erring on the side of toughness, who could blame me? Didn't history have different yardsticks for our toughness and theirs?

I plunged ahead. “The important thing, Shamsky, is to deliver a good pitch, hard and sincere, then step back and be able to gauge your affect. If

it's no go, then don't waste time arguing politics, just move on. But if you've got them hooked, or you think you might, then for christ's sake don't let up. Pour it on thick. Jimmy yourself right up next to them and talk. Smell them, taste them, crawl inside their clothes to show you know what their concerns are, you know how badly they want to do what's right . . . and then pitch again, this time as if the future of the universe as we know it is hanging in the balance. Because Shamsky, it *is*. And then, before they have time to think it over, or to stall, or pack up and move to Bakersfield—tell them that we prefer checks, if possible, so they'll have receipts.”

Shamsky—who had been writing all this down in that blue notebook, nodding away in obedient rhythm to my words—looked up with a querulous expression. “Is . . . is that really why?”

I softened my tone a bit. “No, that's not really why. Really why is because when they're writing the check, they make the numbers rounder than when they're paying cash. Still, this country loves receipts, it runs on them. An American with a receipt is a happy American, and Citizens in Action aims to please.” I laughed, trying to relax him a little. “Okay, so put down the notebook.” He did, but with great reluctance. “Your shift goes out in fifteen minutes. You'll be in Levine's car. You feel ready?”

Shamsky nodded, straightened his collar, walked into the bathroom, and threw up.

“Dammit, Jack, I wish you wouldn't make them so nervous,” Ruthie snapped. Perlmutter giggled into his clipboard. “Get fucked, Perlmutter.”

I ignored them and turned to Levine. “Listen, spend about an hour with him, then let him go off on his own. But keep an eye out, okay?” I was privately revising my estimate of Shamsky. He might not even last the whole shift, I thought.

He went out that night, canvassed four blocks in Walnut Creek, and raised a hundred-twelve for the Mobilization. Levine came back gurgling like a fountain. “Jack, such a *pitch* this kid's got! It's like music, the way he delivers. It's, it's . . . *elegant*.” He leaned heavily over my desk, scattering papers. “He doubled me, Jack. *Doubled* me!”

Well, we all made a big fuss over him, particularly Levine (“A Nobel Prize before he's thirty, I predict!”) and Ruthie, who couldn't seem to congratulate him enough. For my part, I was going to reserve judgment. I'd seen one-night sensations before, guys wired on adrenalin, idealism and

chutzpah who rake it in as if by magic, only to fall on their faces later in the week.

As if he sensed my train of thought, Shamsky approached my desk cautiously, handed over a pile of checks, a fat wad of bills, and — this killed me — enough quarters to keep every laundromat in Oakland busy for a week, then mumbled into his shirt, “Just a lucky night, I guess.”

“All this change, Shamsky. Where’d it come from?”

He seemed embarrassed. “I ran into some kids at a playground. They didn’t *have* checking accounts, Jack. You don’t mind, do you?”

He pitched to a bunch of kids playing ball? And they *went* for it? If it had been anyone else, or stated in any other way, I’d never have believed it. “Nah. Good work. Good night, Shamsky.”

“Night, Jack.” He gathered up the rucksack and ambled towards the stairs. I watched him go. Let’s see how he does in San Leandro, I thought.

In San Leandro he did one-forty-three and Levine’s smug grin was beginning to cloud with envy. “Don’t tell me,” I said, when they came in at ten that evening. “He doubled you again.” Levine nodded, pulling off a checkered jacket a dead man wouldn’t wear. “How about the others? Perlmutter, Bando.”

“You know Bando. Sixty-five, the usual. And Perlmutter’s on the rag about some girl, didn’t even make quota.”

“And the kid?”

He shook his head wearily. “I don’t know how he does it, I tell you. And *strip-mining*, yet!”

“What’re you talking about strip-mining? We’re still supposed to be doing Mobilization out there. Didn’t you tell him?”

Ruthie came over and sat down on the corner of my desk, wiping her glasses on the bottom of her shirt. I caught a glimpse of her smooth, tanned stomach over the waistband of her jeans. There was more to life, it occurred to me, than fighting Richard Nixon.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” Levine went on. “This kid’s pitching two things at once! I heard him do it: he snared this old rural guy with some wilderness pitch, brings up strip-mining, they get to talking, and then Shamsky hits him with the war, don’t ask me how. I mean, this guy’s *sensational!* An artist!”

Ruthie lit a joint and squinted at me through the smoke. “There’s something about the way he looks at a person, you know. Even I’ve noticed it.”

Yes, I thought, I've noticed you noticing it. "Let's just hope it lasts."

I went into the back office to find Shamsky moving his lips slightly as he totalled his checks. When he'd finished, I asked him to do his pitch for me, role-playing as if I were a vaguely-interested homeowner. And Levine was right, it *was* like music—the intonation, principally, though he made certain gestures of expression which didn't hurt him any. He'd hook you with the soft, hesitant tremor in the voice, the damp eyes that weren't quite wet, the head cocked to one side (he had a bad ear, he explained later) almost inquisitively, as if even while his mouth was moving his ears were straining to listen, to comprehend, to receive. And then he'd smile this grand, slow smile, and his twin rows of high ivory-like teeth would glow like a harvest moon. Yes, he had style, that Shamsky. I made him pitch again, and this time I stopped him at odd points, throwing him off, but he never failed to recover. Sometimes I felt like he'd forgotten I was there, for once he got rolling he seemed entirely without self-consciousness, without tentativeness, without any fear of failure whatsoever. Afterwards I gave him a few pointers—certain tricks of emphasis, inflections, a relevant joke or two (which he didn't seem to get—Shamsky had no discernible sense of humor). We sat there for a couple of hours until everybody but Ruthie had gone home, until I'd told him almost everything I'd ever known about canvassing, which I'd been doing since I was ten, and Shamsky wrote every word down in that notebook of his, nodding along furiously. I was very taken with his enthusiasm. He was never quite still, though I detected a kind of rigidity in him, too, some vague formality that made me wonder what he was really like inside—what music he listened to, what teams he rooted for, what kind of birthday cards he sent his mother.

Still, he had talent, and he was a quick learner, and it might have just been that bad ear that made him seem a little off. After he'd gone, I went up to record the evening's figures on the big board, humming to myself. The office overlooked a particularly seamy stretch of Telegraph Avenue. I stood at the window, chalk in hand, staring off into the jagged lines of neon that criss-crossed the night, listening to the traffic of two and a half million souls. I felt tired and strangely proud, as if I'd just passed the baton in an important relay. The radio was full of anti-war news: someone was burning draft records back east. My pulse jumped. With kids like this in action, who knew? History was on our side, after all. Maybe our train was

finally pulling into the Finland Station! Ruthie walked in, and I said, "Hey, babe? Let's get married."

She turned out the office lights and tossed me my keys. "I'm not the wife type," she said, with much affection. "I'm the girlfriend type."

Hence, Girlfriend. A couple of months later, she moved in with Shamsky.

And so it went. With Cambodia, Kent State, Attica, McGovern, UFW boycotts, UMW strikes, AIM demonstrations, nursing home corruption, abortion reform, and environmental misdeeds to be addressed, we managed to keep ourselves occupied. Thanks to a fortunate convergence of our enthusiasm, public sympathy, and world events, things began to take off: I hired half a dozen more canvassers, we took on three extra lobbyists in Sacramento, and my picture began to appear regularly in the local papers beside the press releases Girlfriend and I co-wrote while Shamsky and the others walked the neighborhoods. Even as I was taking a good deal of the credit, I was fully aware that it was Shamsky who provided our guiding force. True, I made the decisions. But the drive, the single-minded determination, came from Shamsky.

This became abundantly clear after the '72 elections, a bitter time for us all. I personally couldn't drag myself out of bed for a week. Hickey ran off to Mexico on a bender, Rhonda went into therapy, and even Levine (who'd voted socialist as always) admitted that his dread had localized into utter loathing for America, for himself, and for most of the rest of us. But not, I'd bet, for Shamsky, who appeared thoroughly undaunted. He kept going, five nights a week, working an extra hour to pick up everyone else's slack. The amount he brought in varied somewhat, but rarely dipped below a hundred—a fact he was careful not to flaunt on the drive home from a shift, so as not to discourage his less-successful co-workers. They knew, though, and this knowledge, instead of embittering them, had the opposite effect—they came to love him, to emulate him. And soon his model was inspiring everybody in the office—even some of the more jaded veterans—and we kept the fight going, plugging ahead on several fronts at once (state propositions, mayoral races, even—ironically—gun control) and having enough success that, by the time Watergate began to unfold, we'd already bought a couple of new typewriters from Bando's brother-in-law and made a few more contacts in the statehouse. Thus with Nixon, hated Nixon, on the ropes, we were able to launch a superb petition drive

and move in high gear towards the knockout punch.

Amidst all this turbulence, I'm happy to say that my personal life had finally stabilized. Within six months of McGovern's defeat, I married a woman I had met selecting graphics at the typesetter. Sylvie (who, like Girlfriend, was a publicist) immediately became pregnant, and for the first time in my adult life I began, perhaps infected by Levine's despair, to consider another line of work.

Besides, it was getting more and more difficult to share an office with the two of them. I mean Girlfriend, who, when Shamsky was out on a shift, would putter about the office with a disconsolate inattention to most of the details that made up her job (and to me, I might add; though Sylvie's phone calls usually prompted her to one or another ironic comment) until Shamsky's nightly six o'clock call. This she would receive breathlessly, with a lot of unnecessary cooing and murmuring. To his habitual question, "How's Jack?" she'd toss off carelessly, "Jack? Oh, Jack's Jack, as always," and merely wave her wrist in my direction. Upon hanging up she'd sigh deeply, as if made pregnant by the noble sound of his voice, and then, duly inspired, she'd sharpen some number 2 pencils, roll up her sleeves, and settle down to write about three or four of the finest press releases it has ever been my pleasure to read.

"Shamsky *idolizes* you, Jack. He really does," she liked to tell me. Well, maybe. But as time went on the little things about him that unnerved me seemed to multiply: the humble manner, the cocking of the head, the abstracted gaze he often wore, the nightly phone calls, and the relentless diligence—bordering on fanaticism—he brought to his craft. And all perfectly genuine, too. After a shift he'd come over to the desk and, in that shy way of his, attempt a little small talk while I went over his checks. "Just a lucky night, I guess," he'd say, as he'd said that first night.

Equally amused and annoyed, I'd laugh shortly. "Lucky? Kid, you're the best. As Levine would say, you're an artist."

"Hell, I just try to remember what you told me. People want to think they're good people, after all. I just help them out. They don't care about the politics of it so much."

Yes, he was genuinely modest. And the two of them would retreat to their little brown-shingled cottage in the Berkeley flatlands, with books all over the floor and something like two dozen cats and dogs howling away in the yard. They planted a nice garden, I remember, in a small plot

next to the foundation, and were forever pressing on me their anemic carrots and dirty lettuce. But we weren't really social. I had a baby, for openers, and Sylvie had already made it clear that she could live without "that self-satisfied harlot" and her "vacant, downright creepy" boyfriend. The two of them were into a Thoreau phase, anyway, making organic goodies on the weekends and reading by the fireplace. Shamsky, a prodigal reader, gobbled political theory like popcorn. Michelet, Burke, Mills, Hegel, Fanon—he'd already left me far behind, but around the office he liked to ask my opinion about them anyway. "Tell me something, Jack," he might say, "when Engels talks about motive and will, you think he means the same thing Feuerbach meant by them?"

"I'm a little rusty on my Feuerbach, Shamsky. What do *you* think?"

"Well, if you remember, Feuerbach posited a certain correlation between . . ." and he'd be off on a long summary which, if it had been designed to impress (and I'm sure it wasn't), certainly did its job. But the curious thing was—though I didn't realize it at the time—he never, in the end, really *gave* me his opinion. In fact, for all the information he had at his disposal, with his perceptive reading eye and finely-tuned memory, he didn't really seem to *have* an opinion, on Engels or, come to think of it, on much else either. Perhaps this is what put Sylvie off Shamsky, for she believes strongly that opinions are fundamentally religious—expressions of the essence, if you will—and, the two of us coming from Jewish homes full of outspoken-to-the-point-of-pathological hardheads, it's easy to see why I agree with her.

So I watched with interest when Shamsky bent over a book in the office, or when he flipped through one of the dozens of magazines that began flooding in addressed to "Shamsky, c/o UCA." "Girlfriend says they're cluttering up the house," he explained, cocking his head, when I raised the issue. "She said you didn't mind. You don't, do you?"

I made a gesture of dismissal. "But why some of these right-wing rags, kid? It's bad for our image."

He rubbed his smooth chin mildly. "Well, I just want to keep up with all sides, Jack, so when I talk to people, I know other sides of things. I don't want to sound *dogmatic*, after all. Besides, Girlfriend says when you used to canvass, you'd carry around three or four newspapers with you, to point things out to people. I thought that was a good idea. I want to be the best, you see."

"You *are* the best. Believe me."

"Yeah, but," and he grinned at me winningly, "To *stay* the best. To scale the heights. That's what this is about, Jack." And with that he buried his nose in the latest *New Republic*, lips moving silently as his eyes ran along the columns, absorbing everything he could on Beirut, or the Supreme Court, or the auto workers, for the remainder of the half-hour before his shift.

This is the Shamsky I'd prefer to remain fixed in my memory, the dedicated boy wonder—not the temporarily berserk cuckold who stormed into my office on a windy spring afternoon in 1975, or the lost shadow he's become these past months. As a matter of fact, if not for the visit I made to his cottage at the end of April, I'd still be able to think of him without sadness; he'd be a fond, if eccentric, object of where-is-he-now speculation, someone for Levine and me to make nostalgic jokes about over scotches at the track. Yes, on the bloated ledger of regrets I carry inside my head, that visit is circled in red ink. And (because I am a competent anticipator of such things) I had no intention of making it in the first place. To Levine I was a bastard, to Girlfriend a rat. Even my old friend Bando, calling (collect) from New Orleans, where he runs the census these days, thought I was being, as he put it, "an unconscionable shmuck." But I held firm for a long while. More than anything, I was afraid to become implicated in Shamsky's malaise, which (like Levine's despair) I suspected might be contagious.

But, to paraphrase the Chartists, if political power was our means, social happiness was our end.

In short, Sylvie thought it was the right thing to do. "Maybe he really does need you, Jack. You *were* his mentor, after all. I don't see why you won't even talk to him, if he's in trouble. Everybody seems to want you to." This said as we waited in line to see yet another interminable movie about divorce.

"Honey," I said, "it'd be useless. I don't understand Shamsky, not even a little. Why does everyone persist in thinking it's up to *me* to straighten him out?"

"Are you kidding? If he looked at *me* the way he used to look at you, if he wrote down every word *I* said, *I* would certainly conclude I had some influence over him."

"That was before he tried to kill me, remember?"

"He didn't try to kill you, don't be so melodramatic. You said yourself they weren't even loaded."

"An oversight for which I'm grateful."

We went into the theater and found seats behind two basketball players, which did wonders for my mood. "Now you're being silly."

"Fine. That's the nicest thing I've been called this month." Just then the movie started, and the top half of the screen, at any rate, was so relentlessly depressing that I began nervously rubbing the fine, translucent hair on Sylvie's forearm, as if attempting to free some captive genie. She left him to find herself; he had to raise the kid on his own. And why? Presumably because he wasn't sensitive enough to her needs, or to anyone else's. I hated him.

We walked slowly, arm in arm, towards the car. "I'll go see Shamsky tomorrow," I said.

Sylvie, still teary and blowing her nose, didn't hear me.

To my relief, there didn't seem to be anybody home. It was the middle of the afternoon, the retrievers were barking away like mad in the yard, and the garden looked like the Cambodian jungle. Nobody answered my knock on the door. Maybe he's gone back to work, I thought. I tried the knob. It yielded under my hand, and I slipped inside. "Hey," I called out, "anybody home?"

The shades were drawn, newspapers blanketed the floor, and the air was heavy and stale. The television blared away some sort of cretinous game show, the volume loud enough to ruin his *other* ear. And there—lying on the sofa, his feet propped high on a couple of throw-pillows, an open jar of Planter's Peanuts resting between the legs of his checkered pajama trousers—there was Shamsky. Six years since our aborted shoot-out, and I swear he still looked the same: smooth chin, apple cheeks, short groomed hair, study-bent shoulders. "Hey, Jack," he said dully, eyes not straying from the television.

I tossed a two-week-old editorial page to the floor, clearing a space for myself on their patched La-Z-Boy. "Mind if I sit down? My arches are collapsing."

He didn't say anything, just watched the screen. I sat anyway. A woman from Riverside impugned her husband's masculinity, and was rewarded with a set of patio furniture. Shamsky, despite himself, chuckled

softly. He stretched his arm over the three feet of distance between us, proffering the Planter's jar. "Peanuts, Jack?" "Sure." Bathed in the blue light from the television, we nibbled peanuts. I was tempted to ask for a drink, but I forced myself to proceed with the business at hand. "So . . ." I said, open-endedly. There was a pause. "Girlfriend tells me you've gone mahoola."

He grunted. I was immediately furious with myself for mentioning Girlfriend. What if he *hadn't* returned those pistols?

"What's going on, kid? How come you're not working? Sick?"

"Not sick, Jack. Dead."

"Dead men watch game shows in the afternoon?"

"I'm serious. It's all over. I cancelled the magazines and everything."

"I hear they're not taking it so well."

He grunted again. "Sure, they're boiling. Two letters last week—one from Buckley, the other from, what's his name, the guy at *Harper's* . . ."

"Lapham."

"Right. Blames everything on me, says he's going to have to sell, nobody wants to be informed anymore. Ah, Jack, what's the difference, it's all for shit anyway."

"You're just burnt-out," I said, though it was a guess. "Listen, you have something to drink, maybe? I'm parched."

He sat up with an effort. "Check the refrigerator."

Calistoga water, apple juice, nonfat milk, some cooking sherry. I stood there considering. Meanwhile, he began to talk.

"We were in Hayward, Jack. Southeast district. Neighborhood's mostly middle and lower-middle, a couple retirees, some GM people from the Fremont plant, you know?"

Of course I knew. I'd canvassed there myself—for Bobby, I think.

"So I was going along great guns, giving a twin pitch: first nursing homes, then the whales. Hell, it only takes an extra second or two, and I get bored doing just one or the other. It might be seven, seven-thirty, and I've already made quota and then some."

"Naturally."

He ignored me, sinking further into himself, looking up at me as if from a great distance. "I come to the next to last house on the block. At first there's no answer, so I knock on the screen one more time, figure nobody's home, and take a minute to get my clippings in order for the

next house. I'm standing there and the door opens, and this woman looks at me—doesn't open the screen, doesn't say anything, just kind of hovers there—and I go into my pitch. She's maybe forty, forty-five, pleasant face. What I can see of the living room behind her looks very tasteful. A nice framed Picasso, redwood furniture. I figure she'll go for at least a twenty-dollar check.

"First I show her this clipping from the *Mercury*, with the old people lying around the game room naked and—"

"But that picture," I interrupted, "that picture's been around since *my* day. It must be ten years old!"

"It's a good picture, Jack. Dramatic. They *bleed* when they see that one."

I poured myself some milk and remained where I was. I wouldn't argue ethics; it was a whole new administration over there at UCA (Girlfriend having left in '79 to write editorials for the *Trib*). The milk smelled sour. "Go ahead, what happened?"

"She doesn't look at the picture, Jack. She looks at *me*. Right into my eyes, mumbles something I couldn't catch, and then just stares at me from behind the screen with a peculiar expression on her face. It was almost as if I *horrified* her or something. "Well, at this point I'm about willing to give up and take my chances on the last house. But when I start to turn to go, I hear a little moan come out of her throat, as if she doesn't want me to leave, as if she'll *scream*, in fact, if I tried to leave. So I don't leave. Maybe I sold her on nursing homes after all, I think. So I say, "we prefer checks, ma'am, so you have a receipt for the contribution."

"And then she changes her expression for the first time. Now it looks like *pity*, Jack. She takes a little step sideways and I see something on the floor behind her. 'Young man,' she says, and, Jack, if you could've heard this voice—it was this low monotone, very disembodied, like from the other side of a cave—'Young man,' she says to me, 'that's my husband. He's stopped *breathing*,' she says. And then she just stands there *looking* at me."

His voice broke, and I looked over at the television for a moment, thinking that I wasn't really up for any more of this. But Shamsky rose from the couch, put his hands in his pajama pockets, and looked at me expectantly. The smooth skin on his cheeks looked slack. "Jesus Christ," I said. "What'd you do?"

"That's the pathetic part, Jack," he said, and the tears began to flow down his face. "*I started to pitch!* I just freaked—I couldn't help it. I have this armful of magazine articles, my clipboard, and a pocketful of checks and cash, and I can't stop myself, I start to pitch—I did San Quentin, nuclear power, the bottle bill, SALT II . . . God, I think towards the end I was running down old stuff like the Mobilization and McGovern, for god's sake, that's how crazy I was. So I can't shut up, and she can't stop listening to me, and her husband meanwhile is behind that screen door on the floor somewhere and I'm riffing through my clippings, showing her this and that, and her eyes are on me the whole time, the *entire* time . . . Man it was horrible! It was the way I imagine Hell must be . . .

". . . anyway, after about ten more minutes of this the ambulance finally came to take her husband away. When it pulled into the driveway she said something I didn't catch. Maybe it was a thank you, huh, Jack?"

Asking my opinion, like the old days. "Maybe it was."

"Maybe it was," he repeated, though his expression remained dark. "Then I went on to the next house on the block. The last house."

"And?"

"And nothing. They didn't bite. Neither did anybody else for the rest of the night. Even Perlmutter brought in more than I did. Perlmutter!" From his gesture of disgust, I realized that even his modesty had deserted him. "The whole next week it continued. I couldn't get the words out, or, if I did, couldn't sound like I meant them. With all the magazines, all the books, all the years of doing it—with all that, I couldn't answer a single goddamn question. Jack, it's over. That should've been me lying on that floor in Hayward."

His despair was so comprehensive, so heartfelt, and so thoroughly alien to everything I'd ever associated with Shamsky that I was reluctant to say anything, for fear I'd make things even worse. But there was a terrible quality to the silence which engulfed us, and I was there for a reason, after all. "Maybe it's for the best," I offered. "Times have changed. Look around—the G.O.P.'s got the Senate, money's tight, Kissinger and Ehrlichman write best-sellers, and nobody gives a damn. You've been on the front lines for nearly twelve years, Shamsky. I'd say you deserve a break."

It was, I realized sadly, exactly what he wanted to hear. "You're probably right, Jack," he said quickly. "I'm thirty-one years old, you know. Jack, you—you think there might be a place for me in the private sector?"

"What about Girlfriend? How would *she* feel about this?"

He swallowed hard. "The truth is, Girlfriend's gone."

"Gone? Work gone, or gone gone?"

"Gone gone. Gone gone gone." And as his eyes swept back towards the television—where happy couples maneuvered about in the simple choreography of life-in-the-present which comes naturally, it seems, to everyone but those people I know personally—I anticipated his next words and swore under my breath as he said them aloud: "I asked her to marry me."

"That was an incredibly stupid thing to do, wasn't it?"

He snapped off the television. The picture shrank into a pale spot. "I don't know. I thought it might be a good idea. And don't patronize me Jack. I still haven't forgiven you, you know. *You*, who I always looked up to."

"It was a long time ago," I said simply.

"A long time ago?" Shamsky looked doubtful; his head dipped somewhat so that his right ear was held higher than his left. It was a familiar enough motion, the old cocking of the head, but this time it struck me with a great deal of force, for in it I thought I saw the key to Shamsky's rise, and the key to his descent.

He was literally deaf to history.

And I stood there thinking—at how many doors had that bad ear of his screened out the sounds—apathy, pain, ignorance, rage—made by those who lived their lives within? And for how many years, I wondered, could he possibly have gone on like that, pitching without interference from the cries of hungry babies, the barking of angry dogs, the thunder of a thousand petty demands? No wonder they'd all believed in him so, emptied their pockets to him, given themselves over with gratitude to the perfect and obstinate hope he embodied. Yes, they—*we*—had all spoiled him, spoiled him terribly. And now, looking at Shamsky in his pajamas, I thought of Lenin's statement to Gorky: "When history retaliates, it stops at nothing."

But that's not what I said. What I said was, "You poor bastard."

He didn't seem to hear me. He asked me again whether there was anything I could do for him, and the tremor in his voice and the dampness in his eyes were affectingly genuine as always. Only his manner no longer struck me as proudly elegant, and I detected no artistry—just a raw and throbbing innocence, the victim of a wayward injury.