

YOUTH
IS THE TIME

BY
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DEDICATION

This book is a partial payment to all the students who have come to my classroom in search of something.

AUTHOR'S APOLOGY

The names of the persons and places in this novel are fictitious, but the characters and situations, it is believed, are only dramatically exaggerated.

Good teaching is an act of love.

EDWARD LISS

If America has presented anything new to the world, it is a new form of society; if she has anything worthy to preserve, it is the principles upon which that society is instituted: hence it is not a Grecian or a Roman education we need. . . . On the contrary, it must have all the characteristics of the American mind, fresh, original, vigorous, enterprising; embarrassed by no artificial barriers.

EDWARD MANSFIELD, *American Education*, 1850

PART 1

. . . every morning the young in heart and mind go forth. In the seedtime of their lives, in the springtide they go forth, the shining face, the wetcombed hair.

Over the continent with the expanding sun, the boy with his briefcase, the girl in braids and ribbon, the reluctant pupil and the serious scholar. Over the face of the continent they are moving in the morning, on foot and bicycle, by hitch-hike, bus, trolley, and by subway.

Alone and anxious, they renew the elusive pursuit, the eager hand upon the book, eyes on the blackboard, the ear strained to catch the word. Each sunny day or sullen rain is fresh. Each morning their hunger trembles in the very air, stirs the dust in libraries, worries the chemicals in the tubes.

Who awaits their arrival? What manner of feet do they sit at? What book, what blackboard, whose word?

Every virgin morning the young go forth, and how shall they find their knowledge, know its true face, and how shall their hunger be fed, and how their love, and how their dream? Who? Who holds the question in his hand?

CHAPTER ONE

1.

IN THE OLDER END OF THE CITY WHERE ONCE FASHIONABLE poodles were aired there remained this open space known as Lincoln Square. It was hardly a park, even for a city park. Within horizons of chimneys, skylights and watertanks the Square lay in a patch of faded resignation. The latest fashion in dogs, parading on leashes, now scratched the cement to reach one of the rare and weary trees.

Where the Rhinelander and the Wanamaker once took their Sunday constitutional now expatriates from the rind and milk of the Middle West, the homemaker with middle-class worries, stretched their girdles on the benches. The park had become an international mart for the exchange of baby formulas. Dark-skinned Latin mothers gesticulated over huddles of parked carriages, slacks-and-halter mothers fought the Freudian fight. The Babel of tongues clashed in rasping and melodious crescendoes, while nearby silent old men in Old World whiskers bent like Rodin's Thinker over homemade chess and checker boards.

Upon its grey network of interlacing pavements boys and men shuffled with shoeboxes throughout the day, and at night the homeless lovers strolled or pressed together on the benches. The park had become, also, a world court for politics and eternal peace plans, the stage where Trotskyite poets snubbed Stalinist prose writers. For city sunbathers with handkerchiefs on their heads, for the lonely-hearted who remembered childhood farms, for all the city-weary

that surged and ebbed restlessly to and fro over the face of the patient Square.

Intermixed with these were the nameless wanderers from nearby flophouses who paused with the comics and the columnists, and before resuming their trackless odyssey wrapped up soiled clothes and food in Superman and Elsa Maxwell. Occasionally a gypsy, color on her face and petticoats, flashed across the park to keep some appointment two days old. And in corduroy suits the little boys who had grown up to be painters or sculptors or story writers sauntered through the park without appointments. All were of the united nationalities, of the melting pot that had no bottom, trapped and enslaved in the enormous city. The Square, as everyone knew, had been named after the Great Emancipator, but no one saw any connection.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Lincoln Square was its service as a campus for Metropolitan University, a city college whose roster of undergraduates would have startled Mr. Chips of Brookfield. . . . Aarons, Adamic, Adams, Anastopoulos . . . Fine, Finely, Fruscella, Fuchs . . . Ginsburg, Goodman, Grabowsky, Grossi . . . Simons, Scardapanio, Slutsky . . . Terry, Tickler, Vilszynska. . . .

On one side of Lincoln Square several remodeled factory buildings had retained their original imprint of grime, machinery, sweat and years. These city-smeared boxes had once harbored rows of squatting men who sewed garments with the assiduous intent of myopic scholars, little men who had gone home in the dark to the neighboring corners of Warsaw, Naples and Minsk. Now rows of students pecked at their books with a curious mixture of industry and boredom. They came from parents who valued a college education because they never had one, and in time the

sons and daughters came to value marks and grades because the world valued dollars and cents. They discovered slowly and painfully that education was operated as a business, just like the real world, and to learn what Socrates said to Plato three times a week cost \$15 a credit, three credits for the week. The university, they learned, operated on a thirteen-hour-a-day schedule, except for Saturday afternoons and legal holidays, a university easily accessible via two elevated lines, four bus lines, five subway systems and, for those who could afford it, thousands of taxis.

But beneath this machinery, like spring grass under slush, grew a green hunger for knowledge. At home they studied with the radio blaring in the front room, the kid brother bawling in the kitchen, the cat bellyaching in the alley, the neighbors conversing up and down and across the court. They rode to college in subways, and rode to classes in elevators, their quest for learning a very rough journey on which they refused to relinquish hope.

2.

At the beginning of each term new students had trouble with the elevator system. Since it was already into the term when Dr. Nash eagerly asked for nine, please, the car tittered in condescension while the Negro operator wearily recounted four, six, eight, ten, and twelve only.

Christopher Nash, strange to the corridors and elevator shafts of Metropolitan University, had been remembering his first day in college, eleven years ago, his heart in an uneven beat as he went toward his first class, an English composition class, and remembering all the September sunshine

of that day. Lanky and awkward with the inward self-restraint of a scholar, Christopher Nash could have shifted his confusion to his recent discharge from the Army, but being a Boston Nash, which meant you did not excuse yourself, he would not blame civilian readjustment for his state of mind. Nor did you blame the sentiment of memory. He had wide grey inquisitive eyes, unnaturally enlarged by steel-rimmed glasses, and a flat broad mouth: These two prominent features, set in a long boyish face, had once enhanced the child prodigy illusion, a stigma which tagged him when he unwittingly betrayed his youth by matriculating at fifteen.

Christopher Nash had had a somewhat unemotional life, ruffled only slightly by the Army in which he served as an instructor, his first and, lamely enough, major personal encounter. His feelings, therefore, as he wandered through the cavernous corridors were the confusion born of purpose in conflict with reality. He had never taught in, nor had even as much as seen the inside of, an enormous city university. He had only the revived anticipation of a first day in college, now as a fledgling instructor.

A tall somewhat striking girl instructed him to walk down one or up one, depending on the state of his legs. The door jolted open and in an exchange of cargo she lost sight of him. Her political science prof hadn't returned from Washington by seven minutes after the hour, so her class left him and the empty room to postwar planning, and she was coming down in the south elevators when she heard this same anxious voice ask for ten, please. The operator mechanically recited three, five, seven, nine, eleven, and thirteen only, and in afterthought raised his chin to examine this come-lately freshman.

Before she could redirect him he disappeared at the next stop quicker than her eco prof escapes from class with the first burst of the five-minutes-to-the-hour bell. English I followed, a required freshman course she had dodged for three years and now loathed because she was a senior. The Admissions Committee was lenient on incoming strangers, the Associate Dean reluctant to release any student who couldn't prove he could read and write.

She moved through the building toward her next class in her flat rubbersoled shoes, the full stride of a young woman who had worked for everything she had and knew its value and was not frightened by what she did not own. A graduating senior, she no longer felt the necessity of being impressed by education. Her widely set blue eyes were clear, the cheekbones Slavic, her nose irreverently pug, her lips well defined without the delineation of lipstick. Her thick blond hair curled carelessly about the tops of her shoulders. In a way, she seemed miscast in a college corridor, particularly with her burden of a black accordion case which she carried with a workman's ease.

Each classroom was similar, walls a dull yellow without pictures or maps, only an efficient blackboard and a set of hooks for hats and coats. A plain table and chair, naked on a small dais, were flanked on both sides by doors to the hallway lined with factory-style lockers. The seats were rows of uniform benches. In the windows a few mellow-rich branches lay warmly in the October distance, the reminders of the campus, and into the room came the intermittent grind of trucks, the honk of taxis, the clop of delivery wagons: All the background voices of the city, the occasional but startling siren, the noises of hidden machinery, the sudden flutter of pigeons.

When the senior girl entered English I, Beverly and her companion Rose were already seated in the front row as usual. They were dressed in ultra-stylish but moderately priced clothes, Beverly taller and angular. She was saying, "Did you ever see such fellas? Next yeah I'm going to Madison, Wisconsin." She added in explanation, "That's out in the West."

"Is it coeducational?" asked Rose.

"Natchelly."

"Imagine, with a lake and canoes."

"I hear it's mahvellous," said Beverly with authority, her eyes on the senior girl. Rose glanced at the Square leaves with a wistful haste as though they might be the magical foliage of some ivy-covered Gothic tower.

Michael entered, extravagantly dressed in the prewar collegiate uniform of white sport oxfords, grey flannels, and a tweed jacket. Freckled and Irish, he was generally excited, so Beverly and Rose regarded him coolly. "Have you heard?" he demanded. "They're going to change textbooks on us."

"What, again?" Beverly had discarded her composure.

"Peffessch Hooker just changed it last year," Rose protested.

"The nerve! I went without afternoon coffee and a danish for a whole week just to buy this collection of lousy love poems." Beverly snapped her scarlet nails on the cover of the book.

Rose said plaintively, "I hope they don't change the title, *Golden Excursions*."

"They can't do this to me," Michael insisted. "They're ruining my business. How can I work my way through col-

lege selling secondhand copies when they change the textbooks so fast there aren't any secondhand copies?"

"Well, the peffessehs must eat," consoled Rose.

Beverly had glanced at the senior girl calmly reading in the last row. She composed herself and remarked with studied casualness, "Perhaps it is only a rumah."

Michael scowled. "Aw, nobody gives a damn what happens. Step right up and wipe your feet."

The senior girl looked up. "Brother," she said, "you said it."

Michael grinned. The girls smiled at her.

A young man with an impish twinkle interrupted them. Clarence sang out, "Hey, did you hear about it? There's been a moider, a moider."

"Not in the college!" cried Beverly.

"Naw, around the corner in the Howdy How. An all night pahty. Just as I was coming from the subway they were bringing out the corpus delicious."

"What a fright he gave me," said Beverly.

"I thought for a minute it was a peffesseh," Rose said.

"Some of the fellas around this college are so fresh you have no idear," concluded Beverly.

"Miss Ritzy-schmitzy again." Clarence had been hurt by the rapid deflation of his dramatic performance. His face was a study in pimples.

The class was filling up. A Chinese girl, Helen Chang, drew no attention and unobtrusively occupied a seat by herself. Neatly and modernly dressed she had the studious detachment of her race, which her rimless glasses emphasized. In contrast, came Sally Lou with red harlequins, a debutante who had attended preparatory schools in the

South long enough to acquire an accent which had proved an insufficient intellectual acquisition to admit her to Vassar. Unlike the Vassar girls who went barelegged and rode bicycles, Sally Lou dressed for classes as though they were cocktail parties.

Dante had long hair which he kept tossing back with a girlish motion, his white face sickly and plaintive. "The new teacher, he's come," he announced proudly. He basked in the spotlight of their questions.

"I hope he likes to read poetry out loud," Rose said.

"Ah, he hasn't seen him," Michael answered.

"I sore him," Dante insisted, but they sensed an inaccuracy in his anxiety to be their informant.

"Somebody's gotta come," Michael said. "They change profs almost as fast as textbooks."

"So what's more importan' than profs and textbooks?" Clarence asked.

"Us—we," said the senior girl.

"I don't get it," said Michael.

"They can't run a university without students, can they?"

The idea seemed to startle them.

"Hasn't she a nice finger wave," Beverly observed.

"Gorgeous," agreed Rose.

"They can't run this factory without raw material," continued the senior girl. "If we don't like it, we can do something about it."

"Talk is cheap," said Michael. "Go pave Wall Street." He was aware of having shocked them with his attack on a senior, and he grinned half-apologetically at the girl in the last row.

"Ah, why don't you enroll at Radio City," Clarence advised him. "The elevator service is better."

They laughed with hasty relief, so eager they were not to hurt each other while so bitter in their resentment.

Two male students entered together, a Negro and a Greek refugee, Charles Goodman who lived uptown somewhere, and Nicholas Anastopoulos who had lived in Athens. They always came in together just before the bell rang, but drew less attention than Sally Lou. She was the foreigner, if anyone was, although no one would have used the word.

The bell rang as the door opened, but it was Professor S. Smith Hooker, Chairman of the English and Rhetoric Department. It had been rumored for years that the S. stood for Shelley or Swinburne, but in truth it was simply Sam. While preparing for his Ph.D. he had choked off the plebeian syllable to an initial, preferring the less odious maternal family name of Smith, and hoping thereby to imply to his English literature colleagues that he was of British hyphen descent. Except for a senatorial mass of flowing white hair Hooker could be taken for a broker, his brusque and business-first manner a matter of professional pride. With impartial ease he could praise good teaching when the budget was not in question, and refuse raises to good teachers when it was.

The students scrambled into their seats, and those already seated straightened and became attentive.

"Good morning. Undoubtedly you have been most impatiently awaiting your new instructor," he announced without looking at the class. "I see Dr. Nash isn't here, and I wanted to introduce him. He is a most promising scholar, and I want you to like him." He smiled into an explosive grin for their collective appreciation, and glanced nervously at the door. "Dr. Nash has been up at Harvard among the dusty old books and is tidying up a bit." He paused for